



Metasemantics and Intersectionality in the Misinformation Age

Truth in Political
Struggle

Derek Egan Anderson

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Praise for *Metasemantics and Intersectionality in the Misinformation Age*

“I am extremely excited to see this book. Debates about language—words like ‘woman’ and ‘racism’—have been absolutely central to vital political issues for some time. They have also been weaponised, used to argue that important issues are “just about language.” This book takes these debates seriously—both politically and linguistically. It is wonderfully wide-ranging, deeply grounded in both intersectional theory and analytic philosophy of language. We’ve been needing a book like this for a long time!”

—Jennifer Saul, *University of Waterloo, Canada*

“This timely work draws together various themes—knowledge and oppression, truth and misinformation, language and power—and grounds them in a discussion of practical issues that should concern us all. Bridging conversations in linguistics and politics, this book is a long overdue and necessary complement to debates that examine the intersection of the political with other philosophical sub-disciplines, like epistemology and ethics. To come across a work that reveals something you have understood but have been unable to express, that examines how language can empower and disempower, is both exciting and will speak to many who have felt themselves silenced without fully understanding why.”

—Briana Toole, *Claremont McKenna College, USA*

“A truly impressive melding of hard-core analytic philosophy and serious politics.”

—Naomi Scheman, *University of Minnesota, USA*

“This book presents a novel and sophisticated metasemantic theory of how words acquire their meanings, and applies the theory to highly politically controversial terms. Anderson’s account provides a radically new and illuminating perspective on disputes that inhabit the borderlands between the straightforwardly factual and merely verbal differences. The book will be of great interest to those working on metasemantics as well as political philosophers.”

—Cory Juhl, *University of Texas at Austin, USA*

“A unique and important attempt at combining (or perhaps more aptly juxtaposing) analytical philosophy with critical theory and post-structural elements. It is timely given the current political arena and addresses important political and linguistic questions. The work makes a convincing case for the metasemantic view and provides an answer to what truth means in a “post-truth” world in which the very idea of “post-truth” has been usurped in the same ways as the work outlines racism and the category of woman has been.”

—Laci Hubbard-Mattix, *Washington State University, USA*

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To Melissa and Egan, the center of my world

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ABBREVIATIONS

| | |
|-----|--------------------------------------|
| GMA | General Metasemantic Adequacy |
| IMA | Intersectional Metasemantic Adequacy |



Truth in Political Struggle

Kwame Ture said, “You know the truth from constant struggle against lies. That’s how you know the truth. Constant struggle against lies.”¹ This is not a transcendent metaphysical theory of truth. It is a practical view of truth grounded in political struggle. It is not the nature of truth that it should be covered up with lies. Rather, it is the nature of structural oppression that it seeks to cover up the truth. Lies and misinformation are crucial for creating and sustaining oppressive power structures. Transforming an oppressive system into something that more closely resembles a just society requires overcoming the lies and misinformation that sustain that system. Hence, the struggle for truth and the struggle for justice are intertwined.

What is truth and how is it related to political struggle? These are big philosophical questions, but as anyone following politics lately has probably noticed, they are highly relevant today. We see groups of people constructing narratives and worldviews that are dramatically at odds with one another. We find people sinking deeply into these narratives. The deeper we go, the more cut off from one another we become. Attention to history shows that this is not really new. Which worldview you inhabit is predictable on the basis of your politics. The narratives we live by are created and spread by political forces in service of political ends. Our

¹Ture (2013).

fragmented understanding of reality almost appears to give rise to some kind of radical political subjectivism in which the opposing factions literally inhabit different realities. But in truth there is only one reality we are all part of. Political struggle is about coming to terms with this reality as a collective.

Our present political situation is characterized both by complex forms of social inequality and by pervasive misinformation, ignorance, and ideological barriers that prevent the truth of that social inequality from being widely understood and accepted. We seem to be enmeshed in different meanings and different epistemological communities with little chance of reaching any consensus view of reality. Objectivity seems very far off—if by objectivity we mean getting everyone to agree about what is going on and what needs to be done in order to promote justice, freedom, equality, safety, and well-being. Yet, I will argue, we must use a concept of objective truth to see ourselves through this difficulty and engage in the democratic process of figuring out what we should do given how reality really is.

This book develops a framework for understanding the role of objective truth in political struggle by merging the perspectives of two disparate camps of philosophical thought. The first perspective comes out of twentieth-century analytic philosophy. The second emerges from Black feminist thought, intersectionality studies, trans feminism, critical race theory, and other critical theories. The result of the synthesis will be a theory of truth based in formal semantics on which truth is objective and transcends political divisions, but which is centrally concerned with social power and the ways that systems of domination exist and evolve through the strategic use of misinformation to shape people's conceptions of reality.

For the traditional analytic philosopher, truth is apolitical. True and false things are asserted in political discourse, but truth *itself* is just an abstract relation between language and reality. The analytic philosopher's case studies are mathematical discourses, scientific theories, and odd sentences like "It is raining and it might not be raining"² and "Every farmer who owns a donkey beats it."³ These are data for model-theoretic semantics, the construction of quasi-mathematical theories linking natural language expressions to domains of real-world entities using functions, sets, variables, and morphisms. In this abstract realm, truth and other

²Yalcin (2007).

³Kamp and Reyle (1993).

semantic properties have nothing essential to do with social identity or political struggle.

For the critical theorist, the queer theorist, the poststructural feminist, the student of Indigenous studies, language and thought are so steeped in politics, history, and social inequality that it makes no sense to talk about truth without talking about power. On the most extreme version of this approach, sometimes attributed to Michel Foucault, truth just *is* power. There is no distinction between saying what is true and having the power to convince or compel a significant population to accept what you say. Moreover, all meanings are seen as socially situated, and nothing can be interpreted across the horizons of political or social identity (Haraway, 1988). Each group has its own proprietary language that tracks with its own conception of reality, in which it defines its own meanings. Consequently, a statement can only be true relative to some social group or other. From the critical poststructuralist perspective, a notion of truth that transcends social situation is itself a tool of power and a source of manipulation and control.

My synthesis of these perspectives is focused on clarifying and facilitating difficult conversations around racism and gender-based oppression. Specifically, I am concerned to address issues that seem to be disputes about *semantics*, issues such as: what does the word “racism” mean? Does it refer to patterns of historically rooted oppression and domination, such that white people cannot properly be called victims of racism? Or does it refer to mere differential treatment on the basis of race, such that promoting the welfare of one racialized group over the other counts as “racist” even when the one racialized group has historically been marginalized and oppressed for the benefit of the other? What does “woman” mean and who counts as a woman? Do trans women fall under the extension of “woman?” Is the sentence “Trans women are women” literally true when spoken in ordinary, mainstream contexts—those contexts informed by a culture that is historically trans-exclusionary, in which conversational participants typically do not understand or accept the existence of non-traditional gender identities—or is the sentence only true when spoken in contexts that provide the social scaffolding for trans identities to be respected (Bettcher, 2013)?

Disagreements about gender and racism are often conceived as disagreements over semantics. Each side uses the crucial words of the discourse, “racist” and “woman,” in distinctive ways with distinctive meanings. These differences in meaning then imply differences in the

truth-conditions of sentences. The result is that each political faction can speak truly in its own language even when the factions appear to contradict one another. When one group says, “Trans women are women,” and the other says, “Trans women are not women; they’re men,” both speak truly, albeit with different meanings of the word “women.” When one asserts, “Affirmative action is racist,” and the other asserts, “Affirmative action is not racist,” both statements can be true, if the word “racist” has different meanings in the two sentences.

I want to argue against this picture for a view that many people intuitively realize, that arguing about word meanings is trifling and insignificant in a way that undermines the relevance of these conversations for the democratic process. If these politically heated arguments about gender and racism turn out to be merely arguments about semantics, then they are not nearly as interesting or important as they might seem to be.

Political disputes about gender and racism are important in a way that semantical disputes are not. That is because we are really arguing about racism itself, not about the meaning of “racism.” We are arguing about whether trans women are women, not about what “woman” means.

Rendering a substantive political dispute as a semantic issue tends to divest the dispute of its political significance. I think this effect is often produced strategically. Framing a substantive dispute as a semantic debate deflects and derails the line of thought that threatens to upend the status quo. Rendering arguments about gender and racism as semantic rather than as substantive first-order debates is a tool of the oppressor. It is therefore strategically imperative that advocates for social justice find a way to talk about contentious political issues without falling into the trap of semantic assent.

I am working to understand political discourse as aimed at first-order truths, not at semantics. My approach depends on a certain view of metasemantics. Metasemantics is the theory of where meanings come from. On the view I will develop and argue for, the meanings of words are shared across political camps. Even though people vehemently disagree with one another about the nature of racism and gender, they in fact mean the same thing by “racist” and “woman.” How can people mean the same thing by “woman” if they disagree about what women are? Stay tuned.

On my view, political struggle in the misinformation age is not a struggle for control over the meanings of words. It is rather a struggle for control over our epistemic norms and practices, over our social institutions that we rely on for information, and over the character of our social

epistemic networks of trusted friends and family members. The solutions to our epistemological problems cannot be pursued in the abstract. Simply clinging to the concept of objective truth cannot alleviate the socially situated, politically motivated skepticism we are seeing in post-truth politics. Instead, we must focus on confronting, as a society, the ways in which power shapes our disparate understandings of reality. This is precisely the point at which our political perspectives are dissociated and contradict one another—who is oppressed? Who is dominating whom? But nothing less ambitious than the work of talking across the political divide about structures of power and their effects on truth has a chance of succeeding.

The central political reality that informs this book is the existence of intersectionality, the system of interlocking forms of oppression made up of racism, patriarchy, cis-hetero supremacy, neoliberal capitalist domination, ablism, and others (Collins, 2002; Crenshaw, 1990). Intersectional critical theory is aimed at exposing the ways in which systems of domination rely on misinformation and ideological confusion in order to maintain themselves. On the perspective to be defended, a theory of truth for natural languages must proceed by taking the reality of intersectionality as its starting point. Only by attending to the ways that misinformation functions to sustain intersecting systems of oppression can we accurately represent the semantics of the languages we speak.

An objective theory of truth is necessary for us to understand that some politically situated perspectives are objectively more accurate than others. There are facts—and there are no alternative facts—about things like the nature of racism and the nature of gender. Social and political forces produce widespread ignorance and misinformation about these facts. Widespread ignorance and misinformation are part of the oppressive system itself. They function to reproduce its structure in new iterations and protect it from critical inquiry and activism. Only through confronting the systems of power that spread misinformation can social justice initiatives make progress, and that confrontation must be carried out using a concept of objective truth. But how should we understand objective truth such that it may play this crucial role in political struggle? That is the central question this book aims to answer.

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Politically Contested Terminology

2.1 HIJACKING THE WORD “RACISM”

In the summer of 2019 President Trump tweeted that four junior congresswomen, all women of color, should “go back and fix the totally broken and crime infested places from which they came.”¹ The next day one of the four women targeted by this remark, Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez, responded via Tweet:

It’s important to note that the President’s words [yesterday], telling four American Congresswomen of color “go back to your own country,” is hall-mark language of white supremacists.

Trump feels comfortable leading the GOP into outright *racism*, and that should concern all Americans.²

Ocasio-Cortez uses the word “racism” in accord with a theoretical understanding of racism developed in critical race theory and intersectionality studies. On this understanding, racism involves the systematic oppression of groups of people on the basis of racial categorization.³

¹Trump (2019a).

²Ocasio-Cortez (2019).

³This conception has been developed by many scholars. See, for example, Crenshaw (1988), Gotanda (1991), Bonilla-Silva (1997), Collins (2002), Charles Mills (2014), Kendi (2019).

According to this perspective, racism in the US in the twenty-first century takes the form of white supremacy. It essentially involves the disempowerment and disenfranchisement of people of color, those who already have less social, economic, and political power within a society that has always overwhelmingly promoted the power and interests of white citizens and continues to do so.

The refrain “go back where you came from” functions as a white supremacist weapon, consistently deployed against people of color and implying that the target is both not authentically American on account of their race—implying that the generic American is white—and also implying the targeted persons are not welcome to stay. Many people of color in many contexts will encounter variations of this refrain, always with the effect of attacking their right to exist within the US. It is also a constant refrain within white nationalist conversations, fostering solidarity among racist white folks who see the US as a country created by and for white people. For these reasons, it is widely known that what Ocasio-Cortez says is true. “Go back where you came from” is hallmark language of white supremacists. The use of this language is part of the wide and multifaceted pattern of racial oppression in the US. Therefore, Trump’s tweet was racist.

Trump defended himself. His response had two components. First, he aimed to discredit Ocasio-Cortez’s use of the word “racist” directed at him, writing, “Whenever confronted, they call their adversaries, including Nancy Pelosi [Democratic Speaker of the House], ‘RACIST.’ Their disgusting language ... and the many terrible things they say about the United States must not be allowed to go unchallenged.”⁴ Here Trump is attacking Ocasio-Cortez’s use of the word “racist” by suggesting it is being deployed purely for political gain and also claiming that such uses of “racist” to highlight and criticize white supremacy in the US must be challenged. Calling her language ‘disgusting,’ Trump accuses Ocasio-Cortez and likeminded critics of misapplying the term “racist” against him. According to Trump, Ocasio-Cortez called his tweet “racist” not because it is true that his use of “go back where you came from” was racist, but rather because she wished to defame and demonize him on the social-political stage.

Many white people have voiced similar misgivings about uses of the term “racist,” maintaining that the word functions primarily to attack and

⁴Trump (2019b).

demonize anyone who disagrees with anti-racism advocates. Crucially this line of criticism presupposes that, in the majority of cases, applications of “racist” are not veridical, are not true. If “racist” is being used primarily to attack and demonize, then those cases to which the word is being commonly applied are not true examples of racism.

Thus, there appears to be substantive disagreement about what racism is. Advocates of the critical race theory understanding of racism (including Ocasio-Cortez) believe that Trump’s tweets were racist, while Trump and his supporters—many of whom fear that “racist” is being deployed indiscriminately for political gain—believe his tweets were not racist. There is genuine disagreement here about what racism *is*. This is not a semantic disagreement merely about what the word “racism” means.

Trump and Ocasio-Cortez have different theories of racism. They do not agree about what makes something count as racist. But this does not automatically entail that they use the word “racism” with different meanings. A disagreement about what racism *is* does not necessarily entail a disagreement about what the word “racism” means.

Consider an analogy: Isaac Newton argued that light was a stream of particles, while opponents such as Christian Huygens argued that it was a wave phenomenon. It does not follow that Newton and Huygens *meant* different things by the word “light.” Indeed, they both referred to the same phenomenon. They merely disagreed about its nature. Insofar as it is possible to refer to a singular phenomenon and disagree about its nature, it is possible that Trump and Ocasio-Cortez can both refer to the same phenomenon—racism—yet disagree about its nature. I maintain that such disputes happen very often in politics. We disagree about the nature of politically significant phenomenon while speaking a shared language with shared meanings. It is important to see political discourse in this light, as aimed at first-order truth and not semantics, even when fundamental disagreements arise.

Trump’s second line of defense is, somewhat ironically, to redeploy the word “racist” against his adversaries in order to defame and demonize them. He tweets: “The ‘Squad’ is a very Racist group of troublemakers who are young, inexperienced, and not very smart.”⁵ In another tweet about a month later, Trump wrote, “The Amazon Washington Post did a story that I brought racist attacks against the ‘Squad.’ No, they brought

⁵Trump (2019c).

racist attacks against our Nation.”⁶ What is Trump claiming? It seems very unlikely that Trump is intending to assert that ‘the Squad’—Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez, Ilhan Omar, Ayanna Pressley, and Rashida Tlaib—are contributing to the systematic oppression of people of color. Rather, Trump’s claim is that these women are racist in virtue of putting race and racism at the center of the political conversation in the US.⁷

Why would it be racist to put race and racism at the center of the political conversation? There is a familiar, alternative pattern of usage invoking the terms “racist” and “racism” to which Trump is presumably subscribing here, which accompanies an opposing view of racism. On this way of thinking, it is racist to recognize the race of a person or group, or to cite someone’s race as a cause for action or concern. Neil Gotanda (1991) calls this the “colorblind” conception of racism.

When Iowa State Senator Steve King claimed that it would be racist and sexist to put Harriet Tubman’s image on the twenty-dollar bill, he presumably had the colorblind conception of racism in mind.⁸ King’s thought process was presumably something like: people want to put Harriet Tubman on the twenty because she is Black and a woman. But to act for those reasons—because she is Black and because she is a woman—is racist and sexist, because acting on the basis of race and gender are sufficient for racism and sexism.

Is it true that putting race and racism at the center of US politics is racist? Is it true that putting Harriet Tubman on the twenty-dollar bill is racist? Someone might say, well, that depends on what you mean by “racist.”

⁶Trump (2019d).

⁷Here it may be worth considering the possibility that Trump has no coherent idea what he means when he says something is “racist.” This possibility was suggested by a reviewer who noted that Trump has often said contradictory things and, when confronted with such facts, he has sometimes seemed confused and/or failed to acknowledge any contradiction in his speech. If Trump does not understand what he himself means, then we might say that while his words have a semantic meaning, his speech acts lack a speaker meaning. His intentions perhaps do not fix a content for his speech act due to his lack of care, precision, understanding, or whatever. This form of speech—making assertions without having any clear understanding of what one takes those assertions mean—may even be typical of political speech in the misinformation age. However, throughout this book I assume that a person can speaker-mean to assert a content even if they are very confused about what it is they are saying. Hence, even if Trump has no coherent view of what he means when he says something is “racist,” he may still speaker-mean to assert propositions about racism—even propositions he does not himself understand.

⁸Owen (2016) reports this story.

If by “racist” you mean what Donald Trump and Steve King have in mind when they use the word, then it is true that such things count as “racist.” When you use it as Ocasio-Cortez does, then putting Harriet Tubman on the twenty is not “racist.” On this kind of view, the dispute over the nature of racism is really a semantic dispute over the meaning of “racist.”

Whether it is possible for Trump and King to actually mean something different from Ocasio-Cortez is one of the central questions of this book. I think the answer is no. Our words do not automatically mean whatever we say or think they mean. They don’t mean whatever our political allies say or think they mean. Public language expressions have a shared meaning across political factions. Trump, whether he likes it or not, refers to racism every time he uses the word “racism,” and racism is not what he thinks it is. On the view I am defending, Trump and King speak falsely in a common language, the same language Ocasio-Cortez speaks, the same language all English speakers use.

From the perspective of critical race theory and intersectionality studies, it is neither sexist nor racist to put Harriet Tubman’s image on the twenty-dollar bill. Tubman is a symbol of the strength of women of color to fight both patriarchy and racism. She freed her family from slavery after escaping herself. She helped free dozens of other slaves through the Underground Railroad. Later she joined with the Union Army and guided the raid at Combahee Ferry, liberating over 700 slaves. Meanwhile Andrew Jackson, whose face has featured on the twenty-dollar bill since 1928, owned hundreds of slaves during his lifetime. He began his military and political career organizing militia to kill off the Chickasaw tribe and steal their land in order to redistribute it among poor whites. He fought a genocidal war against the Muskogee nation and later commanded US forces during the Seminole Wars. He was responsible for the Trail of Tears.⁹ Jackson’s image on the twenty-dollar bill is a testament to the brutal, racist history of the US.

The foregoing considerations prove beyond reasonable doubt that Steve King’s assertion that it would be racist to put Harriet Tubman’s image on the twenty-dollar bill is *false*. King’s conception of racism is likewise mistaken. Steve King has false beliefs about racism. His assertions spread these false beliefs. Likewise, Trump’s beliefs about racism and his assertion that Ocasio-Cortez is racist on account of her criticisms of white

⁹For an extensive critical discussion of Jackson’s career as a “famed Indian Killer” and his role in the systematic genocide of Indigenous groups, see Dunbar-Ortiz (2014), Chap. 3.

supremacy are false. In general, a white supremacist understanding of reality is largely coextensive with misunderstanding and ignorance about racism (Mills, 2007, 2014). These are central claims in this book. They highlight the importance of a notion of objective truth and falsehood in political disputes.

Moreover, I argue that semantic facts about the falsehoods expressed by people who are misinformed about the nature of racism, or misinformed about the nature of gender, or misinformed on any politically contentious topic, are fundamental data for understanding truth and meaning. A metasemantic theory for English—one that tells us what our words mean and why, which entails what the truth conditions of our statements are—must crucially be sensitive to the function of misinformation and false representation of politically contested matters of fact. The function of misinformation, I will argue, is closely tied to the reproduction and perpetuation of interlocking systems of social domination, including racism and sexism.

The misuses of terminology perpetrated by Trump and King are attempts to use politically significant terminology that is crucial to social justice movements against the people for whom those social justice movements are carried out. My name for this phenomenon is *linguistic hijacking* (Anderson, 2020). They are hijacking the word “racist,” using it against people of color. Patterns of linguistic hijacking perpetrated by dominant agents spread misinformation and false belief about systems of oppression and function to preserve the status quo against movements that seek to create a more just society.

The notion of ‘hijacking’ raises the question of proprietorship. In what sense does the word “racism” belong to people of color, such that it can be “hijacked” by elite white men such as Trump and King? On the view developed in this book, linguistic proprietorship is closely bound up with politically contested claims about reality. It is because racism really is a form of systemic oppression that afflicts people of color and not white people in the US, and because “racism” refers to racism, that the term functions as a crucial epistemic resource for anti-racist activity. The word’s ideal function given our historically situated linguistic practice is to communicate information about racism. It becomes hijacked when it is used to spread misinformation and false belief about racism.

Accordingly, whether one takes a given use of “racism” to be an instance of linguistic hijacking depends on one’s theory of racism. Such theories

are contested along political lines, but some people are objectively correct in their understanding and others not so much.

If Trump's theory of racism is true, then he is not hijacking the word "racism" but using it correctly. If Ocasio-Cortez's theory of racism is true, Trump's usage does constitute hijacking. So, whether a misuse of "racism" counts as an example of linguistic hijacking depends on what the true theory of racism is. Proprietorship of the word "racism" is determined by first-order truths about racism. Issues of proprietorship will be politically contentious. We should expect nothing else. But the fact that something is politically contentious does not mean there is no objective truth about the matter. That is another of the central themes of this book.

2.2 LINGUISTIC HIJACKING AND GENDER TERMINOLOGY

As with the word "racism," there are bitter political struggles surrounding gender terminology. I will use "gender terminology" to refer to the open-ended set of expressions that are crucially bound up in discussions about gender. Gender terminology includes most obviously words like "man" and "woman," "boy" and "girl," as well as pronouns "he," "she," and "they," among many others; it includes gendered social role terms like "mother" and "father," "brother" and "sister"; it also includes some terms referring to sexuality, including "heterosexual," "homosexual," "lesbian," "gay," "bi-sexual," "pan-sexual" since these terms carry implications about gender; also included are "trans," "cis," "agender," "non-binary," "genderqueer," and so on, through the wide array of gender identities that have been introduced or identified.

I propose to include 'sex' terminology such as "male" and "female" as gender terminology as well. While a distinction is often drawn between gender and sex—gender is often construed as socially constructed and/or performed, while sex is construed as grounded in biology—this distinction is contested along political lines. For example, calling a trans woman "biologically male" is often used by transphobes to delegitimize her identity as a woman. Terms like "male" and "female" irrevocably carry implications about gender, such that calling someone "male" connotes that they are a man, while calling someone "female" connotes that they are a woman. Moreover, as Rachel McKinnon points out, governments and sports leagues typically do not distinguish between sex and gender (McKinnon, 2019). The language used to craft rules and laws typically mixes sex and gender terminology indiscriminately. This provides a further

reason to count sex terminology as gender terminology. Lastly, the majority of transphobic political agitators in both real and virtual spaces refuse to grant a distinction between sex and gender, maintaining the view that a person is male if and only if he is a man and female if and only if she is a woman. Hence, sex terms are clearly part of the politics of gender.

Just as misuses of the word “racist” function to spread misinformation and false belief about racism, misuses of gender terminology function to spread false belief and misinformation about gender. And as with disputes around the word “racism,” one’s view about whether a given use of gender terminology counts as a misuse will be closely tied to one’s political perspective. One cannot be politically neutral with regard to questions about which uses of gender terminology are misuses. Throughout this book, I defend a trans inclusive perspective. I presuppose the truth of trans people’s beliefs and assertions about their own genders. Accordingly, I understand statements like “Trans women are really men” to constitute misinformation. They spread ignorance about gender. I will argue that these facts are crucial to understanding the metasemantics of English.¹⁰

That trans women are women and that contrary statements constitute misinformation are politically contentious claims. But just because something is politically contentious does not mean it’s false, nor that both sides have an equal claim to be justified in their beliefs. The justification for believing that trans women are women depends on accepting trans people’s experiences of gender as crucial evidence for the nature of gender. This itself is a politically contentious epistemological assumption—the fact that trans people’s experiences provide crucial evidence for understanding gender will not be accepted by transphobes. But this is to be explained by the fact that transphobes do not understand what evidence is relevant for understanding gender. Accepting a trans inclusive starting point is part of doing trans philosophy (Bettcher, 2019), and it is a common practice to assume the legitimacy of trans identities within the philosophy of gender.¹¹

Ben Shapiro writes, “If you are a biological man and you believe you are a woman, you suffer from a mental disorder.”¹² Ostensibly a ‘biological

¹⁰Throughout this book I do not assume any view of the metaphysics of gender, other than that trans women are women. This view is compatible with the denial that there is any substantive metaphysical explanation of why trans women are women, or why anyone is a woman. It is also compatible with any substantive theory of gender on which trans women are women.

¹¹See, for example, Jenkins (2016).

¹²Shapiro (2018).

man’ is someone who was assigned ‘male’ at birth, who was born with sex traits associated with being a man, although using the term “biological man” is obviously contentious and aggressive when Shapiro uses it. Shapiro’s statement is a straightforward denial that a so-called ‘biological man’ could have a true belief that she is a woman. In claiming that such beliefs are caused by mental illness, Shapiro implies that such beliefs are delusional and hence false.

According to trans feminists, trans women’s beliefs about their gender are true. So are the expressions of these beliefs in language, as when a trans woman asserts, “I am a woman.” This raises the metasemantic issue again. Is Ben Shapiro speaking truly in his own language when he asserts, “Trans women are men with mental disorders?” using gender terminology with his own preferred meanings?

The dispute over whether trans people suffer from mental disorders is best understood as a factual dispute about the nature of gender and the nature of mental disorders. It should not be conceived as a matter of semantics. The American Medical Association and the American Psychiatric Association both deny that being transgender is a mental disorder. As of 2022, the World Health Organization will no longer classify being transgender as a mental disorder. These are not merely semantic stipulations. Rather, these classificatory decisions are based on empirical evidence about gender and also about mental disorder.

The Shapiro example highlights the relevance of metasemantic theorizing for understanding empirical knowledge. If Shapiro’s claims were *analytic*—if they were true by definition of the words “woman” and “mental disorder” as Shapiro uses them—then empirical evidence would have no bearing on their truth. Anything that is true by definition cannot be refuted by empirical evidence, if we presuppose the traditional distinction between analytic sentences and synthetic sentences. On my view, a metasemantic account of the meanings of politically contested terms must capture the way in which empirical data is relevant for settling political disputes. An acceptable metasemantics must allow for the possibility that Shapiro’s view—that being trans is a mental illness—can be refuted on the basis of empirical evidence.

These issues harken back to famous disputes between Quine and Carnap about the analytic/synthetic distinction. Carnap (1950) theorized that conceptual disputes could always be traced to differences in meaning and that everyone always speaks truly when expressing what they take to be an analytic sentence. Quine (1951, 1960) contested the intelligibility

of distinguishing analytic sentences from synthetic sentences. According to Quine, we should reject the idea that some sentences are true in virtue of meaning alone, and along with it the idea that conceptual disagreements are always disputes about meanings. According to Quine, there is no way to tell ahead of time what kinds of empirical evidence may be relevant to settling a conceptual dispute, and it's always wrong-headed to claim that a dispute is merely linguistic and thus rule out the applicability of evidence or experience for settling the matter at hand.

My view is aligned with the Quinean perspective on this issue. We cannot know and should not stipulate ahead of time that any statement or belief is immune to rational revision in light of future empirical evidence, not even statements that represent conceptual disputes about gender or racism. It is empirically false that trans women, in virtue of being trans, have mental disorders. Treating Shapiro's statement as analytic misrepresents the evidential relations that are relevant for disproving his claim. Moreover, a view on which Shapiro speaks truly misrepresents the way in which his rhetoric functions to spread false beliefs and misinformation about gender, which is part of gender-based oppression. All these facts are important data that an adequate metasemantic theory must capture.

Characters like Ben Shapiro are best understood as ideological misinformation brokers that spread false beliefs and enable transphobic agitators to reject, avoid, and otherwise refuse to uptake relevant empirical evidence. This kind of refusal to countenance empirical evidence is endemic to what has been called the post-truth era (McIntyre, 2018). Most of the concern raised about post-truth politics has been aimed at critiquing the flagrant rejection of empirically ascertainable truths. How many people were at Donald Trump's inauguration? How many people have died of COVID-19? How many legitimate votes were cast for Joe Biden in 2020? These are empirically decidable in principle, although the relevant empirical evidence has been contested in the political sphere.

By contrast, relatively little concern has been directed at the ways in which language is used to spread conceptual misinformation. This has something to do with unspoken but widely held convictions about what is a factual dispute versus what is a verbal or semantic disagreement. Very often conceptual debates are written off as merely semantic and dismissed on those grounds, or at least their importance has been diminished when compared to the flagrant disavowal of empirical evidence. Metasemantic theorizing is needed to defend the claim that disputes about racism and gender are more than merely verbal disagreements, while still capturing

the sense in which political power struggles can affect our ability to think and talk about these things effectively and accurately.

For another example of a politically charged conceptual dispute, consider the following diatribe against the possibility of trans women lesbians delivered by Magdalene Berns:

Lesbians don't have penises. If you're born with a penis and balls, you're male. You don't get assigned reproductive organs. Males are defined by their biological sex organs. Likewise, a homosexual is someone who's attracted to members of the same biological sex. Males can't be lesbians.¹³

Berns's sentiments are emblematic of a position that is often described as 'trans exclusionary radical feminist,' or TERF. Trans-exclusionary radical feminists (TERFs) prototypically maintain that trans women are really men. Consequently, initiatives aimed at promoting trans women's rights and well-being are seen as anti-feminist, as drawing on and reinforcing male privilege, and as eroding the spaces and protections put in place for women and girls. Some TERFs do not deny that trans women are women but insist that trans women are biologically male and because they are biologically male they should be excluded from protections, spaces, and institutions that are provided for women. In her diatribe, Berns grants that trans women are women, but she maintains that trans women should be excluded from the lesbian community on the grounds that they are male. Among other consequences, this view entails that spaces and events that are reserved for lesbians should be closed off to trans women.

Berns, like Shapiro, is a misinformation broker. She is spreading false beliefs about gender and sexuality. Specifically, she is spreading the false belief that trans women can't be lesbians. Part of the correct explanation of her activities is that her utterance "Lesbians don't have penises" is empirically false. Likewise, the purported definitional claims are not guaranteed to be true: "males are defined by their biological sex organs" and "a homosexual is someone who's attracted to members of the same biological sex" are both highly questionable. If a trans inclusive perspective on gender is accurate, then those definitions are inaccurate. The reality of trans gender is empirically determinable, but not by purely biological data, not by theories that refuse to incorporate sociological, psychological, and phenomenological data about gender experience. It also cannot be

¹³Quote transcribed from a Magdalene Berns speech in Genderfree (2019).

determined by what passes for commonsense, because commonsense is deeply affected by cultural biases, propaganda, and controlling images (Collins, 2002).

Whether a biological definition of gender is part of commonsense and whether it is widely felt to be scientific are sociological facts. They are determined by power dynamics that enshrine certain perspectives as commonsense and denigrate certain pieces of information as scientifically irrelevant. Similar considerations apply to theories of racism. What feels like commonsense is a matter of how the people in your community feel, and what feelings they validate in you. Your impression of whether there can be a science of racism is also conditioned by your social sphere. If everyone around you convinces you to believe that anti-white racism is possible by definition, then the thought of doing science about racism seems nonsensical. It's like doing science to figure out whether bachelors are unmarried.

I think there is a strong inclination among analytically trained philosophers to see a contrast between the case involving Magdalene Berns and the case involving Ben Shapiro. Where Shapiro's assertion that trans people all have mental disorders seems more straightforwardly susceptible to empirical refutation, Berns's assertion that males cannot be lesbians seems more like it might be an analytic truth. "Lesbians are not male" might seem to be in the ballpark of "Bachelors are not married." Its truth seems to consist in the relationship between the semantic features of "lesbian" and "male," for example, the meaning of "lesbian" excludes anything from its extension that could possibly be in the extension of "male" given what that word means.¹⁴ Likewise, the sentence "trans women are male" seems to fall into the category of analytic truth (although there are, I believe, strong trans feminist reasons to deny this). It follows from (i) trans women are male and (ii) lesbians are not male that (iii) trans women are not lesbians. So (iii) also has the status of analytic truth on this understanding, since any sentence derivable from analytic sentences is itself analytic (Carnap, 1936, 1956). Similar analytic arguments can be given against the fundamental assertions of trans reality. For example, (iv) "Women are not male" sounds analytic to many people, true in virtue of the meanings of "women" and "male."¹⁵ Then from (i) and (iv) it follows that trans women are not women.

¹⁴For the concept of extension see Chap. 5.

¹⁵See, for example, Byrne (2020).