

## Manufactured and inherent pejorativity\*

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**Abstract** In this paper I develop a semantics for pejorative nouns like *jerk*. As part of this I articulate a typology of [+human] nouns in English, with a primary distinction made between pejorative nouns like *jerk* and neutral nouns like *doctor*. The analysis formalizes three observations about pejorative nouns: (i) They are based on generalizations of observable behavioral properties, (ii) they express subjective evaluations, and (iii) these evaluations are gradable. I show that when features (i) and (ii) are provided by the context, neutral nouns like *doctor* can receive pejorative interpretations. I also argue that pejorative nouns contribute to the semantics as fully at-issue elements contra Potts (2007).

**Keywords:** Pejorative nouns, coercion, subjectivity, gradability, epithets

### 1 Introduction

Pejorative nouns have typically not been a focus in the semantic analysis of nouns, with two exceptions: they play a role in discussions of gradability (Bolinger 1972; Matushansky 2002; Morzycki 2009, 2012; Constantinescu 2011) and they come up in discussions of epithets in which they are a primary component (Jackendoff 1972; Umbach 2002; Potts 2005, 2007). This work attempts to fill this gap in the literature by providing an analysis of the difference between simple pejorative nouns (e.g., *jerk*) and their neutral counterparts (e.g., *doctor*). The analysis formalizes three observations about pejorative nouns: (i) they are based on generalizations of observable, typically behavioral, properties (*behavior-based*); (ii) they express subjective evaluations (*subjective*); and (iii) these evaluations are gradable. On my account, these three factors alone distinguish pejorative nouns from other nouns. Contra Potts (2007), they contribute to the compositional semantics in exactly the same way neutral nouns do.

In what follows, I focus on nouns that can refer to humans. In section 2, I discuss the behavior-based and subjective features of lexically pejorative nouns (inherent pejorativity), and develop a typology of [+human] nouns that reflect these features,

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followed by a brief discussion of gradability. In section 3, I discuss non-lexical (manufactured) pejorativity in cases like *John is such a doctor* and *Stop being a doctor* and give an account based on coercion functions. Finally, I compare this analysis with previous approaches in section 4 and conclude in section 5.

## 2 Distinguishing lexical pejorativity

The simple copular sentences in (1) shows the simple pejorative noun *jerk* alongside the neutral noun *doctor*.

- (1) a. John is a jerk.  
b. John is a doctor.

There are two main characteristics that distinguish nouns like *jerk* from nouns like *doctor*. The first is that nouns like *jerk* are what I call *behavior-dependent* or *behavior-based*. The intuition here is that John's acting like a jerk is sufficient for (1a) to be true. Nouns like *doctor* are not behavior-based in this way. John's acting like a doctor does not make (1b) true, because being a doctor is a matter of completing a course of training, not a matter of how one acts. The second characteristic is that nouns like *jerk* convey a subjective evaluation, while nouns like *doctor* convey something objective and verifiable. In other words, there are no globally agreed upon standards for what constitutes grounds for labeling someone a jerk, but it is uncontroversial to call someone a doctor provided they have an appropriate certification.

### 2.1 Behavior-dependence and subjectivity

What are the linguistic manifestations of behavior-dependence and subjectivity? With regard to behavior-dependence, we can see that nouns like *jerk* are infelicitous with continuations that disavow that the subject displays the associated behavior. This is seen in (2), which seems contradictory.

- (2) # John is a jerk, though he doesn't act like a jerk at all.

In contrast, nouns like *doctor* are perfectly felicitous in such a context. This can be seen in (3), which is not contradictory.

- (3) John is a doctor, though he doesn't act like a doctor at all.

A similar behavior-dependence is seen in deverbal nouns like *smoker* and *painter*. The behavior associated with these nouns is that encoded by the corresponding verb. We see in (4a) and (4b) that such deverbal nouns pattern with simple pejorative nouns in being contradictory when the associated behavior is disavowed.

- (4) a. # John is a smoker, though he doesn't smoke at all.  
 b. # John is a painter, though he doesn't paint at all.

Larson (1998) treats nouns like *smoker* and *painter* as two-place predicates that take both an individual and an event argument. Constantinescu (2013) suggests a related treatment of pejorative nouns. I follow in the spirit of these proposals in encoding this behavior dependence via a further argument of the noun. Specifically, I propose that behavior-based nouns like *jerk* or *painter* take a time interval argument. This proposal makes the difference between behavior-based and non-behavior-based nouns a matter of stage-level versus individual level predication (Carlson 1977). On this view behavior-based nouns like *jerk* are lexically stage-level predicates, with individual-level arising through generic quantification over time intervals.

With regard to subjectivity, we can again consider *jerk* and *doctor* in the simple copular sentences repeated in (5).

- (5) a. Adam is a jerk.  
 b. Adam is a doctor.

Intuitively, the truth of (5a) is a matter of opinion, while that of (5b) is a matter of fact (see Lasersohn 2011). In this distinction, the nominal domain mirrors the adjectival domain, where we see both objective predicates as in (6), and subjective predicates like the predicates of personal taste in (7).

- (6) Adam is German.  
 (7) a. This chili is tasty.  
 b. Rollercoasters are fun. (Lasersohn 2005)

The hallmark of predicates of personal taste is the phenomenon of “faultless disagreement” (Kölbel 2003; Lasersohn 2009), exemplified in (8).

- (8) John: Licorice is tasty.  
 Mary: No, Licorice is not tasty.

Faultless disagreement describes a situation in which two discourse participants utter contradictory statements, and yet neither makes a false statement. When the predication is objective, as in (9), then such a contradiction results in one participant being wrong and the other right.

- (9) John: Adam is German.  
 Mary: No, Adam is not German.

Generally, relativist semantic theories that build on these observations (e.g., Lasersohn 2005, 2011; Stephenson 2007) argue that the truth values of sentences

containing predicates of personal taste are relativized to a judge parameter in addition to any other parameters of the evaluation function (e.g., world and context parameters). This is a kind of indexicality that, as Lasersohn points out, is distinct from the kind associated with indexicals like first and second person pronouns. With these more familiar indexicals, negation of an utterance does not constitute a contradiction, this is seen in (10).

- (10) John: I went shopping.  
Mary: # No, I didn't go shopping.

Because the indexical pronoun *I* resolves to a different individual in each usage, the utterances do not address the same matter. This results in the infelicity of the negation particle *no*.

If, as I claimed above, the distinction between objective predicates and predicates of personal taste carries over to nominal predicates, then we should see cases of faultless disagreement for subjective nouns but not for objective nouns. This is what we find. In (11), with the pejorative noun *jerk*, neither Mary nor John need be wrong. In (12), with the neutral noun *doctor*, one of the two must be mistaken.

- (11) John: Adam's a jerk.  
Mary: No, Adam's not a jerk.

- (12) John: Adam is a doctor.  
Mary: No, Adam is not a doctor.

A second, perhaps more subtle, characteristic of predicates of personal taste is their behavior with factive predicates (Lasersohn 2009). Crucially, factive predicates like *recognize that* express a commitment on the part of the speaker that the embedded clause is true. Thus both positive and negative versions of the sentences in (13) reflect Bill's commitment to John's theory being flawed.

- (13) a. Bill: John recognizes that his theory has flaws.  
b. Bill: John doesn't recognize that his theory has flaws.  
(adapted from Lasersohn 2009)

When the embedded sentence contains a predicate of personal taste, both the opinions of the sentential subject and those of the speaker are expressed, as in (14).

- (14) John recognizes that licorice is tasty.

When embedded under attitude predicates modified by truth conditional adverbials like *correctly* and *incorrectly*, predicates of personal taste again express the opinions of both the subject and the speaker, as in (15).

- (15) a. John correctly believes that licorice is tasty.

b. John incorrectly believes that licorice is tasty.

With pejorative nouns, these contexts produce similar results. In (16), both the subject and the speaker feel that Adam is a jerk. (17) similarly expresses both subject and speaker opinions.

(16) John recognizes that Adam is a jerk.

(17) John correctly believes that Adam is a jerk.

The data presented above indicate that pejorative nouns like *jerk* share important features with predicates of personal taste. Specifically, pejorative nouns also show faultless disagreement, and can reflect both speaker and subject opinions under factive and attitude predicates. As such, I treat them analogously to adjectival predicates of personal taste by relativizing them to a judge parameter.

## 2.2 A typology of [+human] nouns

Given the characteristics of behavior-dependence and subjectivity identified in the previous section we can imagine a four-way typological split. Simple evaluative nouns like *jerk* are behavior-based and subjective, neutral nouns like *doctor* are not behavior-based and not subjective, and we saw deverbal nouns like *painter* which are arguably behavior-based but not subjective. One question to ask is whether something occupies the subjective but not behavior-based quadrant. I suggest that the class of nouns called *slurs* matches these criteria (this label due to Croom 2011, see also Hom (2008) on *racial epithets*, and McCready (2010) on *pejoratives*). This is represented in Table 1. Slurs are pejorative terms for a class of people defined by ethnic, racial, or social groups which can evoke intense negativity. The linguistically interesting property of slurs is that they appear to mix both objective and subjective predications, giving them characteristics of both simple pejoratives and neutral nouns. An example is shown in (18).<sup>1</sup>

(18) John is a kraut.

(18) conveys the objective predication that John is of German descent, and the subjective predication that the speaker views that negatively. It is somewhat underspecified what exactly the negativity is attached to. It seems to be directed at John himself and people of German descent more generally. Slurs like *kraut* are not behavior-based, as we can see in (19) where no contradiction arises.

<sup>1</sup> Because they are so intensely charged, care must be taken even in their mention (for discussion see the above citations and Potts 2007). I follow McCready (2010) in using *kraut* as the exemplar of this class, judging it to have the required linguistic characteristics while being somewhat less charged than other alternatives.

	behavior-based	subjective
<i>jerk</i>	+	+
<i>painter</i>	+	–
<i>kraut</i>	–	±
<i>doctor</i>	–	–

**Table 1** Classification of [+human] nouns.

(19) John is a kraut, though he doesn't act like a kraut at all.

Because slurs convey both subjective and objective information, they do not give rise to faultless disagreements. In (20), John and Mary are understood to be disagreeing about whether Adam is of German descent, but the use of the word *kraut* indicates that they both view being German negatively.

(20) John: Adam is a kraut.  
 Mary: No, Adam's not a kraut.

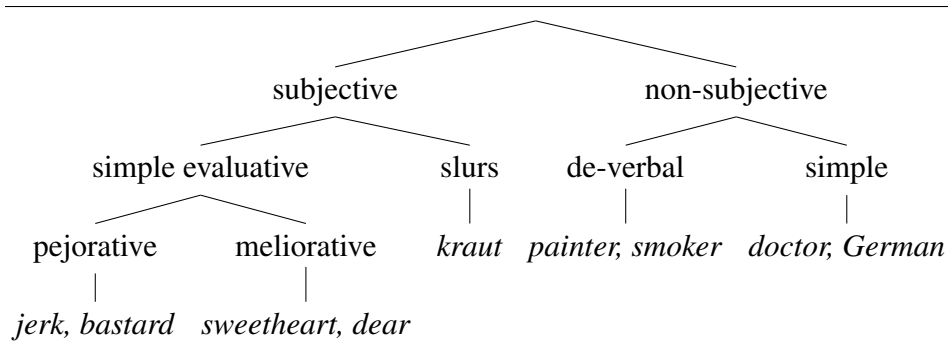
### 2.3 A final distinction: gradability

The behavior-based and subjective characteristics identified above give rise to a secondary characteristic of pejorative nouns like *jerk*: they are intuitively gradable. The effects of this gradability can be seen in the interpretations that arise with size modifiers like *big*, as in (21) (see e.g., Bolinger 1972; Morzycki 2009; Constantinescu 2013 for discussion of these modifiers).

(21) a. John is a big jerk.  
 b. John is a big doctor.

In (21a), the modifier *big* intensifies the negative evaluation conveyed by *jerk*, indicating that John is more of a jerk than is standard. In (21b), however, the thing being modified is external to the fact that he's a doctor. He is not, in other words, more of a doctor than might be expected. The predominant reading instead is that John is a famous or important doctor. I capture this contrast in what gets intensified (the core meaning of the noun in the case of *jerk*, something external in the case of *doctor*) by positing a degree argument for pejorative nouns and not for neutral nouns.

The data presented in these sections served two purposes. They identified the critical properties of behavior-dependence, subjectivity, and gradability in pejorative nouns. They also provided evidence motivating articulations in the typology of



**Figure 1** A typologic tree. Major splits distinguish subjective and non-subjective nouns, and then behavior-based from non-behavior-based nouns. Simple evaluative nouns are further distinguished by the polarity of the evaluation.

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[+human] nouns based on subjectivity and behavior dependence. The resulting typology is shown in Figure 1.

In the next section, I look at non-lexical pejorative meanings that arise for nouns like *doctor*. I argue that the contexts in which pejorativity arises are exactly the contexts in which behavior-based and subjective readings are evoked.

### 3 Manufacturing pejorativity

In section 2 we looked at the inherent, lexical pejorativity encoded in nouns like *jerk*. We saw that behavior-dependence and subjectivity are defining characteristics of pejorative nouns that are lacking in neutral nouns like *doctor*. But it is also true that neutral nouns can acquire pejorative interpretation in certain contexts. One such context is given in (22) in which the neutral profession term *doctor* is interpreted negatively.

(22) Don't be such a doctor!

The observation that neutral nouns can have pejorative readings is not new. [Matushansky \(2002\)](#) brings up the observation in [Ruwet 1982](#) that it is possible to make just about any noun into an epithet. What is new is the observation that even these manufactured cases of pejorativity are both behavior-based and subjective. My proposal is that contexts that evoke behavior-dependence and subjectivity are the contexts in which neutral nouns can receive pejorative interpretations. I discuss two such contexts which are combined in (22). We begin by examining the effect of intensifier-*such*, develop an analysis based on two coercion operators (see [Matushansky 2002](#)), and then briefly turn to a case that does not involve scalar coercion,

Manufactured pejorativity

that of negative imperatives.

### 3.1 Coercion with intensifier-*such*

Lets start again with simple copular sentences. (23) shows each of the four classes of noun identified in section 2 in such a context.

- (23) a. John is a jerk.  
b. John is a painter.  
c. John is a kraut.  
d. John is a doctor.

In this context, *jerk* expresses a subjective, behavior-based predication, *doctor* expresses an objective, non-behavior-based predication, and *painter* and *kraut* hold intermediate positions, as was summarized in Table 1.

When modified by intensifier-*such*, the inherently neutral noun *doctor* and the inherently pejorative nominals *jerk* and *kraut* are interpreted negatively. The deverbal noun *painter* can receive the same kind of negative interpretation, but there appears to be more optionality in this case. The examples are given in (24).

- (24) a. John is such a jerk.  
b. John is such a painter.  
c. John is such a kraut.  
d. John is such a doctor.

Even *jerk*, *kraut*, and *doctor* are not affected by *such* in quite the same way. Intensifier-*such* strengthens the meaning of *jerk* fairly straightforwardly: the magnitude of John's jerkiness is being claimed to be high. The slur *kraut* is not so uniformly intensified. Only the subjective pejorative aspect of its meaning is strengthened. John is certainly not being described as more strongly German. The inherently neutral noun *doctor* undergoes the most drastic change in that a subjective, pejorative meaning arises, and it is this that is strengthened. The negativity of (24d) can be made clearer with a continuation like *I tried to tell him how upset I was and he prescribed me iron supplements!*.

In addition to subjectivity, modification by intensifier-*such* also results in behavior-based readings for *doctor* and *kraut*. This is seen in (25) and (26).

- (25) # John is such a doctor, though he doesn't behave like a doctor at all.  
(26) # John is such a kraut, though he doesn't behave like a kraut at all.

	subjective	behavior-bound	gradable
such a jerk	+	+	+
such a painter	(+)	+	+
such a kraut	+	+	+
such a doctor	+	+	+

**Table 2** Nouns intensified by *such*.

In sum, when *such* modifies simple pejorative nouns, slurs, and neutral nouns, they give rise to subjective, behavior-bound, and gradable predications. Deverbal nouns like *painter* do not become pejorative by default. In *John is such a painter*, a pejorative reading is available, but so is a reading where *such* intensifies the quantity or quality of John’s painting. The behavior-dependence of *painter* provides another means of satisfying the requirement of gradability imposed by *such* that is not available to *doctor*. These observations are summarized in Table 2.

One important thing to note is that, although the subjective readings we have seen so far with *such* are negative, it is not appropriate to encode that negativity in *such* itself, since *such* can just as easily intensify positive predications, as in (27).

(27) John is such a sweetheart.

I propose (contra Constantinescu 2011) that intensifier-*such* is a straightforward degree modifier. My lexical entry is shown in (28). What *such* does in *such a doctor* is create a context that demands a scalar property from the simple property conveyed by *doctor*’.

(28)  $\llbracket \text{such}_{int} \rrbracket = \lambda R_{\langle d, \langle e, t \rangle \rangle} . \lambda d_d . \lambda x_e . R(x)(d)$  such that  $d$  is high.

### 3.2 Inherent pejorativity, inherent neutrality

In light of the discussion in section 3, I propose the following denotations for inherently pejorative nouns and inherently neutral nouns.

The denotation for a simple pejorative like *jerk* will take the form shown in (29).

(29)  $\llbracket \text{jerk} \rrbracket^j = \lambda d_d . \lambda x_e . \lambda i_s . \text{jerk}'(x)$  at  $i$  to degree  $d \wedge d$  is above threshold for  $j$ .

The *behavior-dependence* is encoded by a time interval argument which requires that some demonstrable jerk-like behavior take place at  $i$ . The *subjectivity* of the predicate is captured by judge parameter  $j$  following Lasersohn’s (2005) treatment of predicates of personal taste. Finally, the *gradability* of the simple pejorative is encoded here with a degree argument.

Deverbal nouns like *painter* are not subjective, but they are behavior based. While the behavior they are associated with is arguably gradable, it is not straightforward to say that they require a degree argument in the same way that simple pejorative nouns do. As such, I propose the denotation in (30).

$$(30) \quad \llbracket \textit{painter} \rrbracket = \lambda x_e. \textit{painter}'(x) \text{ at } i.$$

Slurs like *kraut* also express a subjective evaluation. Like deverbal nouns, they are not clearly gradable. And, as previously noted, they are not behavior-based. As such, I propose the denotation in (31).<sup>2</sup>

$$(31) \quad \llbracket \textit{kraut} \rrbracket^j = \lambda x_e. \textit{German}'(x) \text{ and } j \text{ disapproves.}$$

Finally, the neutral noun *doctor* is not behavior-bound, and is neither subjective nor gradable. As such, it has the simple denotation given in (32).

$$(32) \quad \llbracket \textit{doctor} \rrbracket = \lambda x_e. \textit{doctor}'(x).$$

The lack of a time interval argument makes *doctor* a stative, individual-level predicate. This contrasts with simple pejoratives, which are stage-level on this analysis. Analyzing nouns like *doctor* in this way means that pejorative readings undergo two forms of coercion: from individual-level predicates to stage-level predicates, and from non-gradable to gradable predicates.

### 3.3 Manufactured pejorativity

The generalization I suggest about manufactured pejorativity is that pejorative uses of neutral nouns involve (i) a behavior-based reading and (ii) a value judgment regarding that behavior. Crucially, there is an ordered dependency between these two ingredients. You cannot get a value judgment from a lexically neutral noun in the absence of a behavior-based reading. You can, however, get a behavior-based reading in the absence of a value-judgment. In progressive predications, for instance, we get behavior-based, stage-level interpretation that is perfectly compatible with neutrality. This is seen in (33a). In (33b) we see that the presence of intensifier-*such* again results in negativity.

- (33) a. John is being a doctor.  
       (e.g., *He's reading charts and writing prescriptions.*)  
       b. John is being such a doctor.  
       (e.g., *He's not listening but thinks he knows best.*)

<sup>2</sup> I note here that there is an important question, though not a central concern of this work, as to how the objective and subjective elements interact. Interested readers are referred to Hom 2008, 2010; McCready 2010; Croom 2011 for proposals that directly tackle this tricky issue.

On this view there are three stages on the road from a basic nominal predicate to a pejorative: (i) the simple individual-level property stage (*doctor'*), (ii) the behavior-based, stage-level property stage (*being a doctor'*), and (iii) the subjective evaluation stage (*such a doctor'*). With these stages in place, we can step through the case of manufactured pejorativity that arises with intensifier-*such*. As argued above, neutral [+human] nouns give rise to a simple property interpretation in simple copular sentences. These are stative, individual level predications and are value neutral in that they do not convey statements of subjective judgment, as in (32). As statives, these predicates are incompatible, in their simple meaning, with progressive aspect. As a result, placing them in progressive contexts, as in (33a), evokes a time-bound set of characteristic behaviors which the class that is picked out by the noun engages in. This set of characteristic behaviors is still value neutral. In the case of intensifier-*such* predications, the last piece, subjective evaluation, comes about through a need for gradability. Neither the simple property meaning nor the characteristic-behavior meaning is explicitly gradable, but one thing that is gradable is the positive or negative evaluation that a speaker assigns a given property.<sup>3</sup>

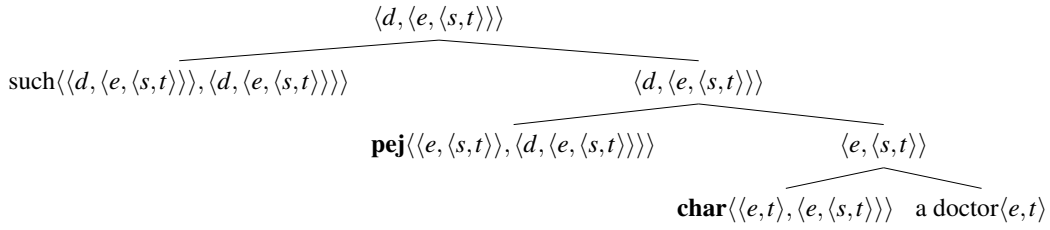
We start with the simple stative denotation of neutral nouns. The added complexities in the sub-property interpretation and the scalar evaluative interpretation arise through the application of coercion functions. The first of these, I propose, is the **char** function in shown in (34). **Char** takes a simple stative noun and makes it a stage-level predicate by requiring some characteristic sub-property of that predicate to be exhibited at a time-interval. The presence of this interval argument allows the stage level predicate to occur with the progressive. Note that the simple predication is no longer required to be true of the subject, which is desirable for cases like (35), where it is understood that Johnny is acting like a doctor.

<sup>3</sup> One potential challenge for the view that the characteristic-behavior meaning is non-gradable comes from comparatives. While the comparative form of *big* retains a physical size reading, (ia), comparatives with *more* do indeed seem to modify a something like prototypicality (thanks to Géraldine Legendre for raising this issue).

- (i) a. John is being a bigger doctor than Bill. (size)  
 b. John is being more of a doctor than Bill. (prototypicality)

Prototypicality modifiers can typically modify a much wider variety of elements than intensifiers like *big* can. This includes expressions that would not count as gradable by other metrics. One such questionably-gradable expression is *prime* in the sense of *prime number* which is shown is shown modified by *more* in (iia). Prototypicality modifiers cannot, however, felicitously modify expressions which lack a clear prototype, like *non-Methodist* in (iib) (Morzycki 2012).

- (ii) a. Two is more prime than three.  
 b. # John is being more of a non-Methodist than Bill.



**Figure 2** The coercion functions **char** and **pej** facilitate type compatibility between intensifier-*such* and the neutral noun *doctor*.

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$$(34) \quad \llbracket \mathbf{char} \rrbracket = \lambda P_{\langle et \rangle} . \lambda x_e . \lambda i_s . \text{MOST } y \text{ s.t. } P(y), \text{MOST } z \text{ s.t. } \neg P(z), \exists Q_{\langle et \rangle} \text{ s.t. } Q(y) \wedge \neg Q(z) \wedge Q(x) \text{ at } i.$$

(35) Little Johnny is being doctor today.

Recall that we treat intensifier-*such* as a degree modifier, with the denotation in (36) (repeated from (28)).

$$(36) \quad \llbracket \text{such}_{int} \rrbracket = \lambda R_{\langle d, \langle e, \langle s, t \rangle \rangle} . \lambda d_d . \lambda x_e . \lambda i_s . R(d)(x)(i) \text{ at } i \text{ such that } d \text{ is high.}$$

The means that even after coercion via **char** we still have the type mismatch shown in (37) (I use ‘!!’ to indicate incompatibility).

$$(37) \quad \langle e, \langle s, t \rangle \rangle \text{ !! } \langle \langle d, \langle e, \langle s, t \rangle \rangle \rangle, \langle d, \langle e, \langle s, t \rangle \rangle \rangle \rangle$$

This type mismatch triggers further coercion to satisfy the requirement of intensifier-*such* that its argument be a gradable property. I propose that one way this gradability requirement can be fulfilled is via the coercion function **pej**, shown in (38). **Pej** takes a stage-level property and makes it scalar by adding a subjective evaluation. Recall that in this implementation, the evaluation is relative to a judge parameter *j*, which in most matrix clauses picks out the speaker.

$$(38) \quad \llbracket \mathbf{pej} \rrbracket^j = \lambda P_{\langle e, \langle st \rangle \rangle} . \lambda d_d . \lambda x_e . \lambda i_s . P(x) \text{ at } i \wedge j \text{ disapproves to degree } d.$$

With these two coercion functions, the simple predicate  $\lambda x_e . \text{doctor}'(x)$  can become the kind of scalar, stage-level property required by *such*. We can verify that now all the types align appropriately, as shown in Figure 2. Readers interested in a more detailed implementation of these ideas are referred to the appendix. I next turn to a case of manufactured pejorativity that does not rely on scalar coercion, namely that of negative imperatives.

### 3.4 Negative imperatives: pragmatic pejorativity

I have shown that we can manufacture pejorativity through semantic coercion. Here I show that pejorativity can come about pragmatically as well. The case in point is that of negative imperatives like (39a) and (39b).

- (39) (To John, a physician)
- a. Don't be a doctor!
  - b. Stop being a doctor!

When the addressee is a doctor, such an imperative is incompatible with a simple property interpretation and so receives the stage-level behavior-based interpretation. Unlike with intensifier-*such*, where negative evaluation comes about as a way of satisfying a scalarity requirement, this pejorativity, I propose, is purely a pragmatic inference. I will assume as background a view of imperatives like that in Portner 2004, 2007. On Portner's theory, discourses consist of three main components: a Common Ground which tracks the propositions that are agreed to be true (see e.g., Stalnaker 1978), a Question Stack which tracks issues that the discourse tries to resolve (see e.g., Roberts 2012), and a To-Do List which tracks properties that each participant agrees to try to have. Imperatives serve to add entries to the To-Do List.

The imperative in (39a) has the denotation in (40).<sup>4</sup>

- (40)  $\llbracket \textit{Don't be a doctor!} \rrbracket = \lambda e_x : x = \textit{addressee}_c . \lambda i_s . x$  does not display the characteristic properties of doctors at  $i$ .

The intuition here is that adding (40) to the addressee's To-Do List results in a discourse in which those properties are viewed negatively, at least when displayed by the addressee.

One nice thing about this approach is that the polarity of the speaker's evaluation of a predicate gets encoded transparently in the relative polarity of the imperative.<sup>5</sup> In this way, positive imperatives can result more easily in meliorative readings than the *such* predications in the previous subsection. An example is given in (41), which conveys that the speaker views manliness positively. Even inherently pejorative nouns can receive a somewhat meliorative interpretation. (41b) conveys that the speaker will find jerk-like behavior acceptable in the current situation.

- (41) a. Be a man!  
b. Be a jerk, if you must.

<sup>4</sup> This denotation incorporates a prose paraphrase of **char**(doctor).

<sup>5</sup> Of course other contextual cues like tone of voice may play a role.

This sketch has shown a case of manufactured pejorativity that arises from the pragmatics of imperative sentences, rather than the semantics of gradable modifiers. Despite the differences between these two cases, there is an underlying commonality. Both negative-imperative and scalar-coercion pejorativity are dependent on a sub-property interpretation.

#### **4 Relation to previous work**

As mentioned at the start of the chapter, pejorative nouns have largely been discussed only in the context of discussions of gradability and in discussions of epithets. Here I compare the current analysis with stances taken by Constantinescu (2011) and Morzycki (2012) regarding gradability. I then consider the positions taken in Potts 2007 regarding subjectivity and the relation between his *expressive* elements and pejorative nouns.

##### **4.1 No degree arguments**

Constantinescu (2011) has a thorough discussion of the behavior of many degree modifiers, including many of those discussed above. Specifically, her work addresses the use of these modifiers as diagnostics of scalarity in a narrow sense, i.e. whether the patterns of usage support a degree based account of nominal gradability. In the end, she concludes that gradability in nouns does not involve the kind of scalar structure involved in adjectival gradability. Instead she argues that a variety of other features collude to give an ‘illusion’ of scalarity. The factors she identifies include the expression of a value judgment and a notion of sub-kinds (cf. behavior-based sub-properties). She argues that proposed diagnostics for scalarity do not uniquely identify scalarity, instead picking out homogeneous sets of gradable and non-gradable nouns that have in common one of her colluding factors. She concludes that there are no reliable diagnostics that indicate dependence on scalar structure, and proposes that nouns, even the pejorative nouns considered here, never take degree arguments.

The current work is only peripherally concerned with nominal gradability in general, focusing instead on understanding the semantic properties, gradable and otherwise, of pejorative nouns. It turns out that pejorative nominals are a class that show precisely the colluding factors that Constantinescu proposes yield an illusion of scalarity: the expression of a value judgment and a sub-property structure. Thus, for the purposes at hand, Constantinescu’s arguments are not sufficient to reject a degree-based analysis of pejorative nouns.

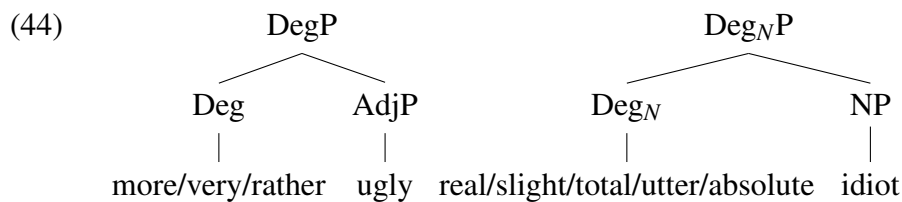
## 4.2 Adnominal degree modifiers

A different kind of approach is put forth by Morzycki (2012). His analysis, like Constantinescu's, deals with gradability in nouns generally. His points of departure are the parallel paradigms of adjectival and nominal modification in (42) and (43).

- (42) a. rather { transparent / straight / long }  
 b. perfectly { transparent / straight / #long }  
 c. partly { transparent / #straight / #long }
- (43) a. real { idiot / smoker / sportscar }  
 b. big { idiot / smoker / #sportscar }  
 c. utter { idiot / #smoker / #sportscar }

The examples in (42) show three degree modifiers that have progressively more restrictive distributions, combining with fewer and fewer classes of adjectives. The examples in (43) show a strikingly similar pattern for modifiers of nouns.

On Morzycki's analysis, the modifiers in (43) are adnominal degree heads with a syntax parallel to that ascribed to ad-adjectival degree heads, as in (44).



This analysis explains, among other things, that these modifiers cannot themselves be modified and that they cannot form predications, as shown in (45) and (46) respectively.

- (45) # a completely real idiot
- (46) # That idiot is real.

Despite the presence of these degree heads, Morzycki proposes that nouns do not have a degree argument in their lexical entries. Instead, the degree modifiers comprise a series of type-shift like operations that extract a scalar meaning from a non-lexical source. The classes of modifiers are distinguished by the operations they encode. The *real*-class is reliant on a function **prototype** that picks out a prototypical exemplar of a predicate and verifies that the current exemplar is sufficiently similar to the prototype. The other two modifier classes rely on a function **dimensions** that

returns a set of lexically encoded scalar dimensions. These two differ on Morzycki's analysis in that the *utter*-class requires that **dimensions** return a singleton set.

Morzycki's **dimensions** function is analogous to my **char** function. Both allow access to aspects of a predicate at a finer granularity than the predicate as a whole. Although Morzycki's analysis does not posit degree arguments in the lexical entries of pejorative nouns, it does provide alternative implementations of some of the same ideas that feature in my analysis. The analysis I developed in section 3 goes a step further in providing explicit mechanisms that give rise to non-lexical, manufactured pejorative readings.

### 4.3 Pejorative nouns and expressive semantics

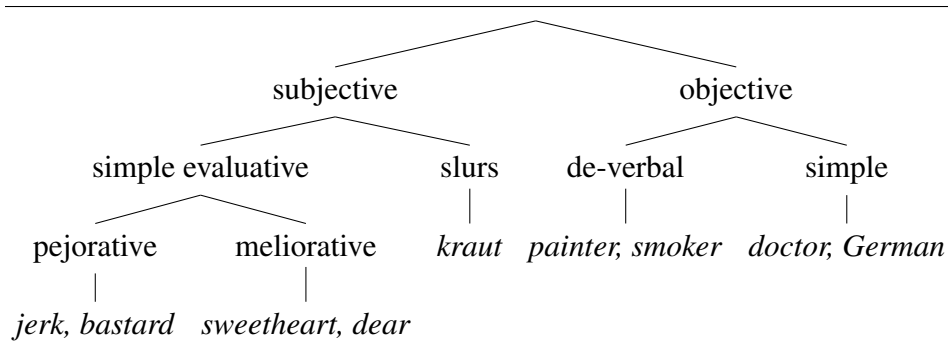
Potts (2007) provides an interesting perspective on pejorative nominals in the context of epithets. He proposes that they are *expressive* elements and provides an analysis in which they have a similar semantics to expressive adjectives like *damn* and *fucking*. Potts points out that expressive elements like *fucking* have an immediate poignant effect on a discourse simply from their being spoken. This effect is not directly addressable through negation, as in (47), and is generally understood as stemming from the speaker even in the presence of an embedded communicative report, as in (48).

- (47) John lost the damn keys again.  
a. That's not true (He didn't lose them).  
b. That's not true (#That's not damn).
- (48) Mary thinks that John lost the damn keys again.

The semantics for expressive elements that Potts develops is quite powerful and, I believe, useful for capturing the properties of expressive adjectives. I do, however, think it is a mistake to categorize pejorative nouns as expressives in Potts's sense. The two clearest indicators in my mind are that typical pejoratives are both easily embeddable and easily deniable, as seen in (49) and (50).

- (49) A: John is a creep.  
B: That's not true!
- (50) Mary thinks that John is a creep.

In (49), we see that negation can directly contradict the content of a pejorative noun. This contrasts with (47), where the negation cannot directly contradict the adjective. In (50), the embedded pejorative noun reflects a commitment of the subject, providing no indication of the opinion of the speaker. In contrast, the



**Figure 3** A typology of [+human] nouns.

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embedded expressive adjective in (48) reflects an emotional stance of the speaker, not of the subject. Based on these data I reject the notion that pejorative nouns like *jerk* and *creep* are expressive elements.

## 5 Conclusions

In this paper I have argued that pejorativity in nouns has two primary distinguishing semantic features: it is behavior-based, and it expresses a subjective evaluation. A secondary characteristic of pejorative nouns is that they are gradable, in that evaluations can be more or less intense. I have motivated a typology of [+human] nouns articulated by behavior-dependence and subjectivity. This typology is repeated in Figure 5. Within the subjective branch, pejorative nouns like *jerk* are wholly behavior-based, while slurs like *kraut* are not. Within the objective branch, deverbal nouns like *painter* are behavior-based, while neutral nouns like *doctor* that lack a clear verbal counterpart are not.

I developed a semantics of pejorative nouns that formalizes these observations. The entry for the simple pejorative *jerk* is repeated in (51). Evaluation is captured by a judge parameter  $j$ , behavior-dependence is captured by an interval argument  $i$ , and scalarity is captured by a degree argument  $d$ .

$$(51) \quad \llbracket \text{jerk} \rrbracket^j = \lambda d_d. \lambda x_e. \lambda i_s. \text{jerk}'(x) \text{ at } i \text{ to degree } d \wedge d \text{ is above threshold for } j.$$

I further showed that pejorativity in nouns like *doctor* arises precisely in those contexts with requirements that can be satisfied by the features of behavior-dependence and subjective evaluation. One such context involves modification by intensifier-*such*. In that setting, the neutral profession term *doctor* underwent coercion first into a stage-level, behavior-based predicate, and second into a scalar evaluative predicate. The second context discussed here involves negative imperatives. There evaluation arises as part of the interpretive force of the imperative, which serves

to add a property to the addressee's To-Do List. In both the scalar coercion case and the negative imperative case, pejorativity is dependent on the behavior-based interpretation of the noun.

### Appendix: Some compositional details

- Time interval argument of behavior-based nouns bound by generic quantifier  
 $[[\text{John is a jerk}]]^j = \text{GEN } i_s. \exists d_d. \text{ jerk}'(d)(J)(i) \wedge d \text{ above threshold for } j.$   
 $[[\text{John is a painter}]] = \text{GEN } i_s. \text{ painter}'(J) \text{ at } i.$
- Non behavior-bound nouns have no interval argument to bind  
 $[[\text{John is a kraut}]]^j = \text{German}'(J) \text{ and } j \text{ disapproves}$   
 $[[\text{John is a doctor}]] = \text{doctor}'(J)$
- Progressive operator (see [Kratzer 1998](#)),  $t$  = time interval of the utterance  
 $[[\text{prog}]]^t = \lambda P_{\langle s,t \rangle}. \exists i_s. P(i) \wedge t \subseteq i.$
- Progressive predications  
 $[[\text{John is being a jerk}]]^{t,j} = \exists i_s. \exists d_t. \text{ jerk}'(d)(J) \text{ at } i$   
 $\wedge d \text{ above threshold for } j \wedge t \subseteq i.$   
 $[[\text{John is being a painter}]]^t = \exists i_s. \exists d_t. \text{ painter}'(J) \text{ at } i \text{ and } t \subseteq i.$
- Stative nouns undergo coercion with **char** to gain an interval argument  
 $[[\text{John is being a doctor}]] = \exists i_s. \text{ MOST } y \text{ s.t. } \text{ doctor}'(y), \text{ MOST } z \text{ s.t.}$   
 $\neg \text{ doctor}'(z): \exists Q_{\langle et \rangle} \text{ s.t. } Q(y) \text{ and } \neg Q(z), \text{ and } Q(J) \text{ at } i \text{ and } t \subseteq i.$   
 $[[\text{John is being a kraut}]]^j = \exists i_s. \text{ MOST } y \text{ s.t. } \text{ German}'(y), \text{ MOST } z \text{ s.t.}$   
 $\neg \text{ German}'(z): \exists Q_{\langle et \rangle} \text{ s.t. } Q(y) \text{ and } \neg Q(z), \text{ and } Q(J) \text{ at } i \text{ and } j \text{ disapproves}$   
 $\text{ and } t \subseteq i.$
- In the simple present with *such* interval arguments are again bound by GEN  
 $[[\text{John is such a jerk}]]^j = \text{GEN } i_s. \exists d_d. \text{ jerk}'(d)(J)(i) \wedge d \text{ is high.}$
- Non-inherently scalar nouns undergo some form of coercion, **pej** is an option for many, non-pejorative quantity based reading available for painter (i.e. John paints a lot.)  
 $[[\text{John is such a doctor}]] = \text{GEN } i_s. \exists d_d. \text{ MOST } y \text{ s.t. } \text{ doctor}'(y), \text{ MOST } z$   
 $\text{ s.t. } \neg \text{ doctor}'(z): \exists Q_{\langle et \rangle} \text{ s.t. } Q(y) \wedge \neg Q(z), \wedge Q(J) \text{ at } i \wedge t \subseteq i, \wedge d \text{ is high.}$

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Manufactured pejorativity

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