Slurs, Assertion, and Predication

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Introduction

Frege has held a deep influence on philosophers’ conception of the linguistic meanings of slurs. According to one reading of Frege - call it the Original Reading, when we consider a slur term and its neutral counterpart, they are distinguished not by their Fregean sense but rather in their associated ideas. When Frege says, “it makes no difference to the thought whether I use the word ‘horse’ or ‘steed’ or ‘nag’ or ‘prad.’ . . . what is called mood, atmosphere, illumination in a poem, what is portrayed by intonation and rhythm, does not belong to the thought.” (Frege 1918: 331), it seems natural to extend his view to explain the negative aspect of a slurring word as the negative tone or idea associated with it. Just as ‘nag’ and ‘horse’ are equivalent with regard to sense, but distinguished with regard to tone, so too are a slurring term and its neutral counterpart. Because sense determines reference, slurs and their neutral counterparts pick out the same individuals - the only difference being that slurs do so in a derogatory way through their negative tone.

For Frege, tone is subjective and often an expression of the speaker’s psychological attitude toward the referent, and so a natural association with slurs is some negative attitude on the part of the speaker toward members of the slur’s targeted class. On this expressivist analysis, what makes a slur derogatory is the subjective attitude of its speaker, and this comports with Frege’s view that ideas are wholly subjective associations with words. Like moral expressivism, this expressivist analysis for slurs is prone to the Frege-Geach problem. Together with other theoretical observations discussed in the paper, this has led to the mainstream contemporary view that the derogatory content of slurs is explained as negative conventional implicature (CI). On this view, the derogatory content is not part of the proposition literally expressed, i.e. Fregean thought, but is rather a kind of non-primary semantic content. The view postulates that there are two distinct levels of semantic content associated with slurs (literal,
truth-conditional content, and CI content), and thus it is a multidimensional view of meaning. The influence of this first, original reading of Frege is clear when we note that the literal truth-conditions are the analogue of a slur’s sense, and the CI content is the analogue of a slur’s idea.

This essay offers a closer examination of the motivations and consequences for a multidimensional account of slurs, and argues that there are prohibitively high costs, suggesting that we ought to reject the original reading of Frege for slurs. Rather than a difference in Fregean ideas, a slur and its neutral counterpart should be understood as differing at the level of Fregean sense; i.e. a difference in their literal, truth-conditional contributions. Call this the Revised Reading. This is not to endorse a descriptivist view of the meaning for slurs, rather it is to reject the notion that a slur and its neutral correlate are referentially identical. When the negative normativity of the supporting ideology for a slur is properly recognized, the Revised Reading is shown to be superior to the Original Reading of Frege on slurs, and a truth-conditional explanation for the derogatory aspect of a slur seems to be most adequate. The truth-conditional route exacts less theoretic cost than the multidimensional one, and plays as good a role in explaining the motivations for the multidimensional account. The truth-conditional route also meshes seamlessly with a cognitive account of semantic content - i.e. the role that content plays in beliefs, belief reports, predication, appropriation, and thinking about the world generally.

1 Slurs and Pure Expressivism

What happens when a speaker insults with a slur? The phenomenon is distinct from simply insulting with purely neutral language. For example, while telling someone that their racial group is inferior, with those very words, is no doubt racist and offensive, it hardly rises to the level of what could be expressed with most racial slurs. Initially, it might seem that the derogatory content associated with a slur is essentially an expression of its speaker’s attitudes toward members of the target group of that slur. On this pure expressivist conception, what makes a slur derogatory toward members of a group is the speaker’s negative (e.g. racist, misogynist, homophobic, antisemitic, etc.) attitudes toward members of that group. Thus when a speaker asserts that some member of group g is a *, where * is a slur for g (e.g. a particular race, gender, sexual orientation, religious affiliation, etc.), the speaker thereby reveals or demonstrates the derogatory nature of the word by signaling their own negative sentiments toward g’s.1

1 If the expressivist view accounts for the derogatory content of slurs, then this also provides independent motivation for an expressivist view of the meanings of normative terms generally.

Upon a more careful examination of how slurs work, however, two complicating features arise. First, we notice that the level of pejorative content seems independent of both the speaker’s communicative intent and their own attitudes. In other words, no matter what is in the heart or mind of the speaker, neither amplification nor dampening of derogatory content occurs because of
it. For example, no matter how much a speaker might dislike people with red hair, their use of the term ‘ginger’ as a derogatory term for redheads has little to no derogatory impact. The inverse case is also true. No matter how much a speaker might respect or sympathize with the plight of black Americans, their (non-appropriated) use of the N-word is extremely derogatory. What this suggests is that the expressivist derogatory content is not directly supplied by the speaker in the context but is rather conventionally determined. Like the sincerity conditions of other speech acts such as apologies or condolences, the speaker may or may not actually harbor the relevantly associated attitude even when they assert sentences that conventionally convey them. Of course since the conventional, non-appropriated use of terms like the N-word stems almost exclusively from racists, it is not unreasonable for hearers to hold those speakers to the racist attitudes conveyed. Thus, the first complicating feature suggests that the derogatory content of slurs is conventional, rather than indexical to the attitudes of their particular speakers in any given context.

The second complicating feature is that pejorative content appears to scope out; that is, even in non-assertoric contexts, slurs are deeply offensive. To be more precise, slurs avoid functional modification relative to various truth-functional and intensional operators that have them in their scope. Call this the functional immunity of slurs. For example, with sentences where a slur occurs under negation or conditionalization such as:

(1) He’s not a *.
(2) If he’s a *, then Mary will be angry.

the derogatory content of the slur, *, avoids negation and conditionalization respectively, and seems to express negative attitudes on the part of the speaker of the sentence in the context, even when the slur falls under the scope of the relevant operator. In short, derogatory content can’t be negated or conditionalized away. When accused of bigotry in uttering (2), the speaker cannot defend their use of the slur with the claim that ‘but I only said if...’. That the derogatory content scopes out to impugn the speaker is also supported by the fact that the speaker of (1) or (2) would be speaking infelicitously if she followed up her utterance with:

(3) But nothing against g’s.

Functional immunity holds for slurs and intensional operators like attitude report verbs, tense operators and event quantifiers. Consider the following examples:

(4) Mary believes that John is a *.
(5) John was a * but he isn’t any longer.
(6) Whenever there are *’s on campus, Mary is angry.

\[ ^2 \text{See Potts 2007 and Hom 2012.} \]
Rather than being attributed to the agent with the reported attitude, to some time in the past, or to some other event, respectively, the derogatory attitude associated with * scopes out and gets attributed directly to the present speaker in the context. Thus the derogatory content of * appears to also escape attitude report verbs, tense operators and event quantifiers. As with examples (1) and (2), the derogatory content fails to be shifted to the attitude of another agent, to another time, or to another event - the speaker who utters the sentence is immediately accountable. Evidence for this is again supported by the infelicitous follow-up claim expressed in (3) to assertions of each of (4) through (6).3 In each case, the speaker that utters * seems to be expressing their own, immediate, negative attitudes toward members of group g. Because derogatory content seems to be functionally immune, derogatory contents cannot be truth-conditionally primary. In other words, they seem detachable from what is said; i.e. the truth value of the pejorative content seems to be distinct from the truth or falsity of what is literally said.

Together, these two complicating observations motivate the conventional aspect of derogatory content and its detachability from what is said, and this has led many to adopt the view that the pejorative content of slurs is a negative conventional implicature.4

2 The Shift to Multidimensionality

Conventional implicature (CI) is characterized as an alternate dimension of meaning to the literal, truth-conditions of a sentence. CI is supposed to be a genuinely semantic dimension of content that is: 1) not derivable, 2) not cancellable, and 3) detachable from the literal truth-conditions of what is said.5 CI content is not derivable via the conversational maxims, and is thus distinct from Grice’s notion of conversational implicature. In other words, CI content is conventional. Because of its conventionality, CI content isn’t cancellable. And because CI content is distinct from the literal truth-conditions of what is said, it is detachable.

To illustrate the CI view of slurs, consider some individual member of group g and call her m. According to this view, asserting the following sentence:

\[(7) \text{m is a *}\]

is to semantically express multiple contents, namely, the propositions expressed by both (8) which gives the literal truth-conditional content of (7), and (9) which gives the CI content of (7):

\[(8) \text{m is a g}\]
\[(9) \text{g’s are inferior}\]

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3See Potts 2007.
5Potts 2007.
6There is room for variance in giving the derogatory CI content; e.g. ‘g’s are despicable’, ‘g’s ought to be discriminated against’, etc.
It bears emphasizing that the content of (8) is neutral, while the content of (9) is the locus of the derogatory content associated with *. That the derogatory CI content is not cancellable, is not derivable via the conversational maxims, and is detachable from the literal truth-conditions of what is said results in a multidimensional framework of meaning for slur terms (i.e. slurs have multiple dimensions of semantic content - literal truth-conditions, and conventional implicature).

The conventional aspect of CI content directly explains the first major observation in the previous section, namely that the severity of derogatory content is independent of the speaker’s own attitudes. Because CI content is not cancellable, this explains the second major observation; i.e. the functional immunity of slurs. CI content is independent of the literal truth-conditions, and CI content is insulated from operators on the literal truth-conditions of what is said. Thus the conventionality of CI content allows for it to escape operators and scope out to the immediate context of utterance.

Identifying the pejorative content of a slur with its CI content leaves the neutral, truth-conditional content to specify the target class of the slur. Call this result the Identity Thesis. Stated explicitly, the Identity Thesis is the following claim:

\[
\text{For any slur } *, \text{ and its neutral counterpart } g, * \text{ and } g \text{ will have identical truth-conditional semantic content.}
\]

In other words, g’s are literally identical to *’s. Initially this might seem problematic, but a significant, positive result of the CI view is a solution to the Frege-Geach problem that plagued pure expressivism.

The Frege-Geach problem arises when we consider that slurs can be embedded in logically complex sentences like material conditionals and disjunctions, and further, that they play some role in deductively valid reasoning. The problem is that an apparent equivocation arises for the expressivist treatment of slurs. When unembedded, the assertion that m is a * works as outlined above - to conventionally signal the speaker’s negative sentiments toward g’s. But when embedded, say in the antecedent of a material conditional, the slur does not seem to work in the same way. The speaker is only saying ‘if m is a *...’, and so they are not directly endorsing or expressing the negative attitude.

If the interpretation of * when embedded is distinct from when it is unembedded, then it isn’t clear how a modus ponens argument of the following form would be valid:

\[
\begin{align*}
\text{If } m \text{ is a } *, & \text{ then } q. \\
\text{m is a } * & \\
\text{Therefore } q.
\end{align*}
\]

Under pure expressivism, the second premise is interpreted differently from the antecedent of the first premise because the non-cognitive attitude associated

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\(^7\)The paper presents these concerns in the next section.
with * is endorsed or expressed in the second premise but not in the first, and so the logical form of the argument does not license modus ponens when intuitively it should.

The move from pure expressivism to hybrid expressivism by invoking CI content is supposed to solve both the Frege-Geach problem and the wide-scoping problem in one stroke. The literal, truth-conditional content of the slur (i.e. the content of its neutral counterpart) is available to secure the truth-functional identity of the second premise with the antecedent of the first premise, thereby preserving the modus ponens inference. And the CI content explains how the offensiveness scopes out even when the slur is embedded. CI content is distinct from literal, truth-conditional content, and hence is immune from operators that function on truth-conditional content.

The result is the theoretic framework that I call multidimensionality which can be characterized with the following tenets:

• The derogatory content of a slur is its CI content.
• The literal, truth-conditional content of a slur and its neutral counterpart are identical.
• The derogatory aspect of slurs is wide scoping because CI content is both conventional and immune from functional operators in the scope of the slur.
• The hybridity of content for slurs solves the Frege-Geach problem.

Multidimensionality (in some form or other) is the dominant theoretic framework, and in the next section I will present three serious concerns, and some of the potential costs for addressing these concerns.

3 Problems with Multidimensionality

3.1 The Assertion Problem

According to the Identity Thesis, the literal, truth-conditional content of a slur is identical to the content of its neutral counterpart. What is bad, or derogatory about slurs is explained by CI content which is separate from the literal truth-conditions of what is said. So the worry then is that when someone asserts that m is a *, they are literally just saying that m is a g. They are not literally saying anything bad. In fact, they aren’t even literally saying anything false if m is actually a g. Call this the Assertion Problem. Speakers of slurs don’t literally say anything bad about their targets - they just implicate it. This is worrisome because it seems like assertions with slurs are direct and literal insults of members of the target class. Potts (2005) argues that there are two main types of data that support the existence of conventional implicature. The one

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is expressive language, and the other is parenthetical clauses. For an example of the latter, when a speaker utters the following:

(10) Mary, the best student in the department, works in metaethics,

what is literally said is that Mary works in metaethics, and what is conventionally implicated is that Mary is the best student in the department. The CI content is like an aside, or as Potts puts it, a “secondary (entailment) that cooperative speakers rarely use to express controversial propositions or carry the main themes of a discourse” (Potts 2005: 7). Even if Mary isn’t the best student in the department, the truth of what is said is not affected. Correspondingly for the CI view of slurs, what is derogatory about a direct assertion with a slur is also just an aside. This seems to miss the point of the communicative intention of racist speakers of slurs who literally, directly and openly derogate members of g for being g’s. What the racist says is obviously controversial to (almost) all those involved in the conversational context.

The defender of the multidimensional framework is not without a response. They might say that intuitions about what is directly said as opposed to what is indirectly communicated are murky. Conventional implicature is supposed to be semantic, so indirect communication might not actually be so indirect. The phenomenology of communication might very well diverge from the actual semantics. They might say that CI content is literally said but is simply not part of the primary truth-conditions, and that this really shows that the criticism is pressing against a distinction without a difference.

3.2 The Cognition Problem

Sincere assertions typically express their speakers’ beliefs. What belief is expressed with a slurring assertion? For example, saying that m is a * seems to be expressing a bigoted belief. It is to express something like the belief that m is inferior because of being a g. It is to think as the bigoted person would think. Contrast that with with asserting and thinking non-pejoratively. For example, holding the belief that m is a g is not derogatory or bigoted. It is to have a neutral thought about m’s group membership. Of course that thought may be false or part of a racializing scheme of thoughts, but it isn’t derogatory in and of itself in the way that the slurring thought is. These cognitive facts must be clearly distinguished by any adequate theory, but the Identity Thesis makes this impossible. Consider the truth-conditions for belief reports. Suppose that S is not bigoted toward members of g. The following belief reports ought to have distinct truth-values:

(11) S believes that m is a *
(12) S believes that m is a g.

If CI content is immune from intensional operators, then it is unclear how this result is achieved. The propositions literally expressed by the embedded clauses are identical. The semantics of attitude report verbs would need to be modified.
to include both what is said, and what is conventionally implicated. The problem is that this exact avenue of response is closed for the multidimensional view because pejorative content was supposed to be wide-scoping and functionally immune from operators in its scope - including intensional operators like belief report verbs.

The defender of multidimensionality might introduce derogatory content as *modes of presentation* to distinguish the truth values of sentence pairs like (11) and (12). Reporting the belief in (11) with * is to make a claim about what S believes under a bigoted mode of presentation, while reporting the belief in (12) with g is to make a claim about what S believes under a neutral mode of presentation.9 There are reasons for thinking that the appeal to modes will not work.10 Even if it works, to introduce the notion of derogatory modes of presentation is to divert much of the explanatory force of multidimensionality. In other words, it offloads what is derogatory about the concept associated with * to modes of presentation rather than making it central to the concept itself. It would seem that if any concept were to be essentially derogatory here, it would be the concepts directly expressed by the bigoted language. Appealing to modes of presentation undermines this intuitive observation.

### 3.3 The Narrow Scope Problem

The final problem for the multidimensional framework is that slurs don’t always scope out. Their derogatory content can sometimes be functionally controlled by operators that have them in their scope. Functional immunity is not universal thus undermining the motivation for multidimensionality.

Consider the example of calling an activist a ‘social justice warrior’ (SJW). The term ‘social justice warrior’ is pejorative, indicating a negative view of someone who engages in social activism but for the sake of their own sense of aggrandizement or sanctimony. Pejoratives like SJW are problematic for the CI view of slurs because they do seem to take narrow scope relative to operators; i.e. their pejorative content is not functionally immune. Consider the following examples that parallel the previous considerations in favor of functional immunity:

#### Negation

(13) Mary isn’t a SJW

#### Conditionalization

(14) If Mary is a SJW, then Jane will be disgusted.

#### Attitude reports

(15) Jane thinks Mary is a SJW.

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9 The distinct modes may or may not distinguish the propositions believed. According to Salmon 1986, the mode is merely part of what factors into the three-place belief relation. For Crimmins and Perry 1989, the modes are part of the believed propositions.  
10 Hom & May 2014.
(16) Mary used to be a SJW in grad school.

(17) Every time a SJW applies, Jane is disgusted.

(18) But she is a genuine activist.

In each of (13)-(17) above, the follow-up assertion (18) is felicitous. This diverges from the structure of the argument that slurs are wide-scoping (sentences (1) through (6) above), and thus shows that wide-scoping is not a universal phenomenon for slurs. This would indicate then that the Identity Thesis is also not universally applicable as sentences like the following appear to be both felicitous and true:

(19) Genuine activists like to do volunteer work whereas social justice warriors just like to tweet about doing volunteer work.

(20) Social justice warriors are irritating but activists aren’t.

Another way to view the problem is to see that certain slurs and their neutral counterparts seem to play distinct roles in deductive arguments. Consider the following:

(21) Mary is a SJW

Therefore, Mary is an activist.

(22) Mary is an activist.

Therefore, Mary is a SJW.

While (21) seems valid, (22) does not, and this indicates that the truth-conditional contents of ‘activist’ and ‘social justice warrior’ are distinct.

As with previous problems, there are resources available for the defender of multidimensionality and the Identity Thesis. One option is to do away with the apparent narrow-scoping counterexamples with a metalinguistic strategy; i.e. when it appears that the negative content of the slur is doing truth-conditional work under some operator, replace it with a metalinguistic interpretation about the prohibited nature of the use of the word itself. The move is motivated by Horn’s metalinguistic negation examples where someone asserts (25) followed by (26):

(25) I’m not cold.

(26) I’m freezing.

\(^{11}\)For following up an assertion of (17), the pronoun in (18) must be understood as a claim about an applicant.

\(^{12}\)Examples modeled after Kaplan 1999 ms.

\(^{13}\)See Horn 1989.
(26) contradicts (25) so the view holds that to maintain coherence for the speaker the term ‘cold’ occurs metalinguistically. What’s really being said in the assertion of (25) is that the term ‘cold’ is inappropriate because it under-reports the speaker’s lack of warmth.

By analogy, when someone asserts (13) followed by (18):

(13) Mary isn’t a SJW.
(18) She’s a genuine activist.

(18) contradicts (13) so the view holds that to maintain coherence for the speaker the term SJW must occur metalinguistically. What’s really being said in the assertion of (13) is that the term ‘social justice warrior’ is inappropriate because Mary is a genuine activist.

The problem with the metalinguistic move is that while its trigger may be well-explained in the negation cases, the richness of the examples that demonstrate the interaction of the derogatory content with various operators is problematic as the view would have to postulate metalinguistic conditionalization, metalinguistic attitude reports, metalinguistic tense, metalinguistic event quantification, and so forth. At best the motivations for these seem to present a tall order that has not been adequately motivated, and at worst this looks suspiciously like an ad hoc patch for a variety of counterexamples to the multidimensional framework.

A second option is to appeal to the context sensitivity of slurs. Context simply determines whether pejorative content scopes out or not.14 This option is deeply unsatisfactory as it simply appeals to context sensitivity as a means of ruling out potential counterexamples to the view. The move is semantically undisciplined and theoretically promiscuous - i.e. it holds that the pejorative conventional implicature for a slur may or may not be immune to operators that have them in the slur’s scope, and this is a matter of context. This undermines wide-scoping as one of the central motivations for a multidimensional treatment of slurs.

A final option is to postulate different forms of truth and valid inference that include appropriateness conditions for the uses of slurs. The semantics of slurs then comes to be a combination of truth-conditions and felicity conditions. The view is given when Kaplan writes “an expression is descriptively correct if what it describes is the case, and I say that an expression is expressively correct if what it expresses or displays is the case (or, if we take what it expresses or displays to be a state, if the agent indeed is in that state)” (Kaplan 1999 ms: 14). Truth-plus is now when a sentence is both descriptively and expressively correct. So validity-plus is the inferential preservation of truth-plus from premises to conclusions. According to this option, the argument in (21) is valid-plus, but the argument in (22) is not valid-plus. And this generalizes so that the semantic contents of slurs is multidimensional to capture both what is descriptively and expressively required.

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14See Harris and Potts 2010
It is unclear exactly how this final option overcomes the narrow-scoping problem and the worries for a contextualist response. Regardless, I contend that altering our notion of truth and logical validity here is not a theoretically disciplined solution, and should be reserved as a last resort. The problem generalizes further as we would have to alter our notions connected with all the kinds of functional operators that we have dealt with including the non-logical ones.

Notice that each option is a rejection of semantic innocence. Embedding allows for different contents to do different work in different contexts, and the rules for this kind of semantic cosmopolitanism are neither well-constrained nor well-grounded. Each option seems to be semantically undisciplined and theoretically promiscuous. This doesn’t rule out the possibility that one of these options can be adequately developed but it does illustrate the high bar that must be met, and that gesturing at one of the moves as an adequate explanation is unsatisfactory. Responding to the three main concerns raised in this section may not be impossible for the multidimensionalist, but it will likely require complex theoretic moves, and those moves will come with not insignificant costs.

4 Rejecting the Identity Thesis

Suppose that one begins with another starting set of intuitions. Suppose one rejected the Identity Thesis. Why would you do this? After all, it seems pretty clear that anyone who understands the term * understands that it is a term for members of g. This intuition can actually be preserved while rejecting the Identity Thesis. Just because racists target members of g with * does not entail that they are successful in their targeting. Why think that racists fail in their referential targeting? Because that targeting is based on a radically failed ideology - that, in short, members of g are intrinsically inferior. We know this to be false - while eye and hair color may be heritable traits, there are no morally heritable traits. And so one might start with the intuition that racists are radically wrong with their use of slurs - so wrong in fact, that they fail to secure objects in their extensions. This is precisely the reason that makes for their failed ideology. Thus when racists make assertions about *'s, they are akin to children making false but meaningful assertions about unicorns.\(^{15}\)

One way of rejecting the Identity Thesis is by adopting a semantically external framework whereby pejorative content is determined by the institutions of bias that support them.\(^{16}\) On this view, slurs semantically encode potentially deeply negative prescriptions that reflect the social conventions of bias that are associated with the slur. To tell someone that they deserve the negative treatment associated with discrimination toward members of their group simply on the basis of that group membership can be extremely harsh and demeaning depending on the institutions of bias that are being drawn from. This makes the offense generated for most hearers a reaction to a genuine, unjust,

\(^{15}\)See Hom & May 2018.

and potentially threatening, normative claim. Targets of slurs are not merely being over sensitive or ‘politically correct’. They are appropriately reacting to prescriptions of unjust treatment like housing discrimination or lynching. And these negative prescriptions are being put front and center of what is being said. They are not merely asides or conventional addenda.

From this viewpoint, expressivism in any of its forms is irrelevant to the analysis of slurs. What you have are speakers drawing upon the institutional power of bigotry, the conventions that come along with that, and a prescriptive encoding of that treatment toward members of group g. This is regardless of the individual feelings or sentiments of the speaker. In many cases, targets don’t care about what’s in the heart or mind of the speaker. What targets care about is their own just treatment and physical safety. Slurs can be threats, they are the emphasis of a particularly unjust way of treating others, and their use comes with negative moral prescription that has real consequences given that people are motivated to act on their normative commitments. Once expressivism is off the table, the Frege-Geach problem is irrelevant. Encoding pejorative content as part of the literal truth-conditions for slurs straightforwardly explains the conventional nature of how these words are bad. The main problem for a truth-conditional account seems to be the (mostly) wide-scoping nature of these terms, and we turn to face this problem in the next section.

5 Predication and the Illusion of Wide-scoping

To effectively maintain a truth-conditional account of slurs like the one described in the previous section, the wide-scoping phenomenon must be adequately addressed. Recall that what is derogatory about slurs seems to be functionally immune. The worry is that if derogatory content is part of the literal truth-conditions for a slur, then it ought to be possible to negate it, conditionalize it and so forth, and thus dampen or even nullify the derogatory effects of this content.

In the past, I have expressed sympathy for two kinds of responses. The first response is an attempt to undermine the reliability of these intuitions in part because of extreme cases that also appear to exhibit the phenomenon - i.e. cases of quotation and phonological similarity.\footnote{I have in mind cases like the word ‘niggardly’ which phonologically resembles the N-word but bears no other significant resemblance.} If slurs in quotation or even words that just sound like slurs generate the same intuitions that ground wide-scoping, then we should be suspicious of these intuitions. The second response is to make use of conversational implicature. The idea here is that any use of a slur, including in embedded contexts, conversationally implicates that the speaker believes that the term is applicable - i.e. that the term has a non-null extension, and hence this conversationally implicated content is an alternate explanation for why we are disturbed in the apparent wide-scoping cases.\footnote{One might wonder about the generality of this implicature; i.e. does it arise for all uses of descriptive terms? A detailed answer is beyond the scope of this paper but I would say that.}
I’m convinced that a third response offers a more comprehensive defense of a truth-conditional account from the apparent wide-scoping worry. The response rests on properly distinguishing between assertion and predication. While assertion is (roughly) the speech act of putting forward a proposition and endorsing it as true, usually with a sentence that has assertoric mood, predication can be conceived as the cognitive application of a property to an object. The application of a property to an object requires the proper sorting of the object relative to the rule that is given by the property. For example, to apply the predicate ‘is green’ to an object o is to sort o relative to green things and non-green things. This is to take seriously the idea that propositional content is the object of the attitudes and that propositional content stands for what we cognitively entertain in understanding a sentence. So if the conceptual content associated with a slur is deeply vile or unjust, it makes sense that hearers are disturbed when they predicate with its content. To sort the world according to a deeply racist concept, for example, is to think of the world as the racist does. For non-racists, that way of looking at the world is flawed and disturbing. Even when a slurring sentence is negated, conditionalized, etc., predication itself is not undone. Such a predication forces on the hearer a particular way of thinking that is offensive, and this is one part of the explanation that the derogatory content of a slur appears to scope out when embedded. Call this the Forced Imagery Triggering account (FIT).

To present the other part of the explanation for the appearance of wide scoping, we first observe that the semantic content for a slur under the truth-conditional view is typically detailed and disturbing. It often includes specific prescriptions like lynching and specific stereotypical properties like laziness and so forth. So what is pragmatically implied in any predication is that the content (or the associated ideology that directly supplies its content) is normatively appropriate - i.e. that it fits the normative reality of the world. It signals that the speaker endorses this way of sorting, that this very sorting scheme is normal and legitimate. Call this a general endorsement of the ideology or sorting scheme encoded by the predicate. General endorsement is to be contrasted with specific endorsement which applies to the asserted content of the proposition. What is specifically endorsed is the sorting of a particular object as satisfying the derogatory, predicative content. So in asserting a sentence like

\[(27) \, m \text{ is a } *\]

the speaker is predicating * of m, and because this is an assertion, the speaker is specifically endorsing that m is properly sorted as a * (rather than a non-*). In predicating with the detailed and disturbing content of *, hearers who don’t share the ideology that supports * are typically offended in having to view such implicatures hold for at least thick normative terms. Here I am thinking of examples like: ‘cowardly’, ‘chaste’, ‘louéd’, ‘blessed’, and ‘Aryan’ which seem to combine both a descriptive and a normative component. See Blackburn 1984, Williams 1985, Gibbard 1992 and Väyrynen 2003. Beyond the properties that each term descriptively encodes, their uses also signal that their speakers ally with a particular ideology or set of supporting concepts and values.

19 See Soames 2010 and Hanks 2015.
the world this way. In addition, the speaker is also pragmatically implicating her general endorsement that * encodes an appropriate way of dividing the world. This higher order, general endorsement is also offensive to hearers who do not share in the ideology that supports this conceptual scheme. Call this the Conversational Implicature of Predication account (CIP). To summarize, wide-scoping is actually when a speaker predicates with the derogatory content of * (in almost any context), they do two things that are often offensive: 1) they force hearers to entertain a degenerate way of classifying the world, 2) they signal that they themselves approve of this classificatory scheme as normatively appropriate. Call this combination of FIT and CIP the Predicative Response.

When considering the embedded cases, the force/content distinction distinguishes two separate kinds of explanations of slurs in embedded contexts. If you uphold the distinction and subscribe to a view like Soames (2010), then the story above holds straight away. Predication leads to general endorsement, and assertion leads to a specific endorsement. When embedded, say under negation, in a sentence of the form:

(28) m is not a *

there is predication but no assertion. Without assertion, there is no narrow endorsement. But predication brings both disturbing content and its general endorsement of that content, and this is what ‘scopes out’. This observation is bolstered in considering that utterances of the sentence above are often made by racists who take themselves to be simply saying that m is not a g. Such speakers are often committed to there being g’s that are *’s, and perhaps even the universal claim that all g’s are *’s. This commitment is pragmatically conveyed in their general endorsement of the ideology that supports the meaning of *.

If you reject the force/content distinction and subscribe to a view like Hanks (2015), then predication and specific endorsement occur simultaneously. For Hanks, any particular sorting of an object to a predicate requires the speaker to take a stand on its result, and so sorting and endorsement go hand in hand. As with the Soames account, predication brings both disturbing content and its general endorsement, and this is what ‘scopes out’. When embedded, however, the Hanks view holds that there must be predicate cancellation. What is cancelled on Hanks’ view is the narrow endorsement. Predication still must occur in cancellation contexts because predication is what unifies propositional content under the Hanks view.

Regardless of one’s position on the force/content distinction, what is crucial here is that predication whether in asserted or unasserted contexts brings with it both a detailed, disturbing sorting scheme, and a general endorsement of that scheme, and so the predication response generalizes as an explanation for how slurs work as they occur in either embedded or unembedded contexts.

The predicative response offers a further generalization in explaining the derogatory nature of slurs when they occur in other non-assertoric sentences like questions or commands. Just asking a question with a slur is sufficient to show that the wide-scoping phenomenon is broader than commonly recognized.
Questions with slurs can be deeply offensive because they require predication with the derogatory content, not because they take wide scope relative to operators. Asking whether \( m \) is a * is sufficient in and of itself to force a hearer to understand the question, and thereby conceptualize the world in a biased manner. The speaker has thereby forced a degenerate ideology upon their hearer. If the hearer in fact does adopt such a biased ideology, then it is important to notice that the conceptualization would not be disturbing for the hearer, and in fact might seem completely natural. But when the hearer does not already adopt such an ideology, they are forced to categorize the world according to this biased system. That this way of seeing the world is both forced on the hearer and deeply inconsistent with the hearer’s values explains part of the intuition behind the illusion of wide-scoping. The other part of the explanation is that predication with a detailed, disturbing concept pragmatically communicates that the speaker gives general endorsement to the concept as a norm. This is also offensive to anyone who hears the question and who does not adopt such an ideology or norm. These considerations indicate that wide/narrow scoping relative to operators is the wrong way of conceiving of the relevant phenomenon. It isn’t that slurs have an alternative content that scopes out. Rather there is a single, truth-conditional content that is highly disturbing and where a speaker seems to endorse the ideology behind that content through almost any application of the word.\(^{20}\)

When that content encodes discrimination that is vicious, speakers can rarely control these two factors that lead to the offensiveness of their utterance. This explains why the rather extreme cases of slurs under quotation and semantically unrelated phonological variants of slurs may cause offense for their hearers. If the slur’s content is disturbing enough, a speaker isn’t able to seal away these psychological and pragmatic effects with quotation marks.\(^{21}\) The effects seep out even for distinct words that just look or sound like the slur. And of course this explains the offensiveness of exclamations of the form:

\[(29) \аст!
\]

that a racist might hurl at a member of the target group. Even without formal

\(^{20}\)This fits with the claim that for some speakers a slur “isn’t even in my vocabulary”. They realize that any use brings with it general endorsement of a biased ideology that they specifically disagree with.

\(^{21}\)Sanford Goldberg raises the following interesting question: suppose that everyone is outraged by Ms. Nice’s being accused of having Done Something Awful. Whenever we hear the accusation we are angered and outraged -- Ms. Nice would never do such a thing, and it is an outrage to suppose otherwise. Even so, it seems to me that I can report Jones’s statement to this effect without generating the anger and outrage, as when I quote him in my utterance of the following: Jones said, ‘Ms. Nice Did Something Awful.’ So how is slurring different? The answer is that slurring is different because under an externalist framework, the semantic content of a slur draws from a rich array of social practices and norms that can be particularly threatening and abhorrent. So slurring is more akin to Jones saying something truly horrific of Ms. Nice, e.g., Jones said, ‘Ms. Nice mutilated the female genitalia of a baby’, where what is predicated in the reported clause directly relates to a socially supported practice that the conversational participants abhor. In the second case, we are not able to seal away the psychological effects in the false report of Ms. Nice’s behavior because the content of the predicate rises to the level of what slurs can semantically encode.
predication, the dynamics of the predicative response explain how utterances of (29) are offensive in that the speaker puts forth a classification scheme and thereby conversationally implicates her endorsement of it.

In cases where predication is less severely derogatory, however, the possibility opens for overcoming this difficulty by expecting hearers to both overcome the discomfort of predating under the scheme and also interpret speakers as disavowing themselves from that scheme. These are the ‘narrow-scoping’ examples like (13) through (17) and:

(30) I’m not prejudiced against Caucasians. But John, who is, [thinks/claims] that you are the worst honky he knows. (Schlenker 2003: 98)
(31) Institutions that treat Chinese as chinks are morally depraved. (Hom 2008: 429)

Because these predicates (‘honky’, ‘chink’, ‘social justice warrior’) are less severely derogatory than the worst slurs, the effect of their predication is tense though potentially controlled. In the right contexts, though hearers may still be moderately disturbed, they can set that offense aside and hold back their blame of the speaker. The cancellation for the pragmatic signal that the speaker aligns with the less severe ideology is also easier to achieve simply in virtue of the decreased emotional pitch that surrounds them. Accordingly, the more disturbing the content, the harder it is for the speaker (and hearer) to manage the phenomenon. For example, one cannot expect the same results after substituting the slurs in the examples above with the unappropriated N-word. The ideology and conceptual framework behind the discriminatory power of the N-word is highly disturbing for non-racist hearers, and so it becomes almost impossible not to be wholly disturbed and thereby hold speakers of the N-word culpable.

Unlike narrow endorsement of the particular sorting, wide endorsement of the sorting scheme itself is particularly difficult to cancel. This is explained by the fact that any kind of predication, and even any mention of the predicate (in quotation or in phonological similarity), is enough to trigger the conversational implicature that the speaker endorses the conceptual scheme associated with the word. Assertoric sentences are also designed for first order, narrow endorsement, i.e. the sorting a particular object relative to a property. This is why negation doesn’t cancel wide endorsement. Using the word in either negated or unnegated contexts is to endorse its associated conceptual scheme as valid. Wide endorsement cancellation requires something other than just using language. Some examples might include: a philosopher who writes a paper to develop an error theory of reference for slurs, or a filmmaker who writes slurs into the lines of a despicable, racist, fictional character. In both cases, the speaker does not simply say that wide endorsement is cancelled - the speaker must demonstrate it by showing their repudiation. This demonstration is most

22For cases like ‘niggardly’, the predicative response is tied to the predicate (i.e. the word) itself. So FIT and CIP are triggered even by a close phonological variant of the N-word.
commonly taken up in the form of appropriation which we turn to in the next section.

6 Appropriation and Predication

Not only does the predication response unify the occurrences of slurs in non-assertoric contexts, it also unifies their occurrences in appropriated contexts as well. Use of appropriated slurs predicate the very same material as non-appropriated ones, and hence without practice and care they can remain offensive and hurtful. When it is members of the targeted group who predicate the slur to each other, it is pragmatically understood as not self-hating but rather a move to subvert power from those who use the non-appropriated slur. It is a signal of camaraderie, allegiance, and encouragement in the face of oppressive institutions. Ultimately, the act of appropriation is a rejection of the ideological scheme that is represented by the slur.

I have endorsed an ambiguity view in the past but now I see that such a view is incoherent. To appropriate some other word distinct from the slur that targets the speaker and hearer would not achieve the political goals commonly attributed to the practice of appropriation. What I’ll call the semantic retention of the derogatory content is actually required for appropriation. If appropriation were to be performed on an alternate content or on an alternate word, then it would not be genuine appropriation. What use would it be to undermine some other word that is distinct from the primary one used by the dominant group to represent their ideology of discrimination? Appropriated slurs must remain slurs, or else the act of appropriation loses its significance. Appropriation is only forceful as a message of subversion, camaraderie, allegiance, and encouragement under semantic retention. Appropriating some other word or meaning would be a hollow political act.

Appropriation should be seen as an act of semantic protest to the wide endorsement of the ideology that supports the appropriated slur. A speaker S1 demonstrates that they stand against the ideology by predicating the slur * to another discourse participant S2 where S1 and S2 both belong to group g. The act of appropriation puts oneself and one’s allies up as targets of the slur. Appropriately understood as not self-hating or a poor attempt at humor, the speaker of the appropriated slur demonstrates that she stands against the ideological scheme that provides the rule for sorting according to the slur. This is one way of cancelling wide endorsement. Initially, self-predication is only coherent as either an act of self-hatred, false consciousness, or bad humor. So hearers will search for alternative explanations for a cooperative speaker self-inflicting such disturbing content - e.g. for some political purpose. Negating by itself isn’t sufficient to demonstrate against the sorting scheme because negating requires predicating which actually deploys the sorting, and it is consistent with the speaker believing that some individuals are properly sorted into the extension.

The pragmatic explanation of appropriation makes it crucial for speakers and hearers of appropriated slurs to both belong to the targeted group of the slur. For example, pragmatic signaling of appropriation is difficult if not impossible to achieve for non-black speakers of the N-word, and non-female speakers of the B-word, particularly if such speakers are members of the respective groups that propagate the oppressive institutions that support the meaning of the respective slurs. Semantic and predicative retention means that FIT is still operative, and so appropriators may also be attempting to toughen up their fellow in-group members. Retention and FIT make it too difficult for the pragmatic distinction of appropriated from non-appropriated uses of slurs when the speaker is an out-group member. Such an out-group speaker who addresses a target with a slur may be a strong ally or may be a vicious enemy, and the context of utterance does not provide easily accessible means for a hearer to determine which is the case. This greatly increases the risk of offensive miscommunication as forcing a negative perspective on in-group hearers is easily interpreted as a hostile act.

From the perspective of members of g, most non-g’s have also not earned the right to deploy the predicative content of slurs - they have not undergone their effects, have not been through the trenches, so to speak. In that way, such attempts at out-group appropriation can often be viewed as a form cultural misappropriation, particularly when use of the appropriated slur comes with a certain amount of social cachet. Non-g’s have not adequately paid the price for this privilege, and their attempt at outgroup appropriation is thus even more easily interpretable as oppressive or at the very least ignorant or insensitive. Being a member of the targeted group is thus essential for this act of semantic protest.

Conclusion

The primary obstacle to a truth-conditional account of the derogatory nature of slurs is the apparent wide-scoping phenomenon. By correctly distinguishing the cognitive significance of predicating versus asserting, we thereby reveal the deeper nature of the meaning of slurs and how speakers come into cognitive contact with them. Given the costs for a multidimensional framework, I submit that a semantically unified framework that endorses the following tenets is the more promising explanation of how slurs work:

Rejection of the Identity Thesis
For any slur * and its neutral counterpart term g, * and g are neither coitensional nor coextensional.
Thus saying that m is a * is to literally say something bad (and false).

Semantic Externalism
Slurs have negative, prescriptive content that is supplied externally by the institutions of bias that support them.
Pejorative content is independent of the speaker’s own particular attitudes toward members of the target group.

The Predicative Response

Wide-scoping intuitions arise because of the cognitive nature of predicating with objectionable properties (FIT), and the pragmatic signal that the speaker endorses this way of dividing the world (CIP).

The predicative response allows for fuller generality in explaining slurs in questions, commands, exclamations, and appropriated utterances.24

References


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