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Slurs: Semantic and pragmatic theories of meaning

LEOPOLD HESS

25. 1 Introduction

In a semi-technical sense which has developed recently in philosophical literature, the term 'slurs' denotes *lexical items*, which are *conventionally pejorative*, refer to *social groups* and convey *derogation* and *negative attitudes* towards those groups and their members. The paradigmatic examples of slurs include racist epithets such as 'nigger', 'chink', anti-Semitic ones like 'kike', or homophobic ones like 'faggot'.[1] Slurs in this sense are to be distinguished from acts of slurring or slurring utterances on the one hand, and on the other hand, from other kinds of pejoratives (see below, section 25. 2).

Slurs are an important topic for a number of disciplines in philosophy, linguistics, and social sciences. The present chapter addresses them only insofar as they are a topic of philosophy of language and theory of meaning. Issues that will not be addressed here include sociolinguistic, psychological, or etymological questions, but also questions properly belonging to moral philosophy: e.g. what is the nature and cause of the harm inflicted by slurs; or social and political philosophy (including legal theory): slurs as hate speech.[2] Each of these subject areas may be relevant to a philosophical investigation into the nature of slurs' meaning, but the focus here is on the semantics and pragmatics of slurs more narrowly construed.

[1] Many disturbing words like these will appear in this chapter. In the interest of clarity, they cannot be entirely avoided. I can only assure the reader that all slurs appearing here are merely *mentioned*, never *used*, and apologize for any unintentional offense.

[2] Interested readers may consult some recent contributions in these areas: Waldron (2012) (harms of hate speech); Anderson et al. (2012), Maitra and McGowan (2012) (social and political issues). Croom (2015a) collects contributions from many different linguistic and philosophical perspectives; Croom (2014a) includes a broad overview of empirical (linguistic, psychological, and sociological) work on slurs and racial stereotypes.

Slurs have been discussed by philosophers and linguists interested in theories of meaning at least since the 1970s, but mostly as a particular or problematic case in the context of a general semantic theory (cf. Grim, 1981; Stenner, 1981; Taylor, 1981 – all discussed in Saka, 2007 – and Hornsby, 2001), especially in inferential role semantics (Dummett, 1973; Tirrell, 1999; Brandom, 2000; Boghossian, 2003; for a more recent discussion see Whiting, 2008; Williamson 2009). After the publication of Hom's seminal 2008 article, as well as several other publications around the same time (Croom, 2008; and chapters devoted to slurs in Saka, 2007 and Richard, 2008), slurs have emerged as a subject of philosophical treatment in their own right, and since then philosophical literature concerning them has grown rapidly.[3] The main issues discussed in it concern the nature of the derogatory (pejorative) meaning of slurs, the mechanisms of its communication, the offensiveness of slurs, and the possibility of reclaimed, non-derogatory uses by target groups. This chapter surveys the philosophical theories of slurs delimited roughly by these topics and timeframe.

Section 25. 2 presents some questions concerning how the category of slurs should be defined. Section 25. 3 presents the main properties of slurs; some of them are controversial and the relevant discussions are mentioned. The following two sections present the most important theoretical approaches to slurs. Section 25. 4 is devoted to semantic theories, which find the sources of slurs' derogation and offensiveness in their encoded meaning. Section 25. 5 discusses pragmatic theories which find these sources in pragmatic mechanisms or general features of how slurs are used, motivated by criticisms of the semantic approach. Section 25. 6 presents debates concerning some particular properties or aspects of slurs, especially the fact that they can be occasionally appropriated or reclaimed by target groups. The philosophical literature on slurs is still growing; new problems are continuously undertaken, and new theories proposed – some most recent contributions are also briefly mentioned in this section.

Several collections of papers on slurs have been published, which the reader may consult to get a better picture of this research area: Sosa (2013 and 2018), Croom (2015a), Finkbeiner et al. 2016 (on pejoration more generally, but includes several chapters on slurs), and Forlè and Songhorian (2016).

25. 2 Boundaries of the category

Slurs are often distinguished from general pejoratives such as 'asshole' or 'motherfucker' (Hay, 2013; Blakemore, 2015; Bach, 2018; Saka, 2007 calls these 'particularistic insults')[4]. Unlike the latter, slurs derogate a whole group, defined by a factor such as (perceived) race, ethnicity, religion, sexual orientation etc., and not just an individual referent. Thus, slurs express prejudice towards the target groups which accounts for their extreme offensiveness. However, the distinction is not as clear-cut as it may at first seem. Jeshion (2013a) questions whether slurs should be distinguished from pejoratives such as 'wino' or 'fatso', 'whore' or 'druggie', which are supposed to apply to individuals not *qua* members of a discriminated group, but based on their

[3] Note that the convention to refer to the target class of expressions as 'slurs' has only emerged very recently (helped by the publication of special issues of *Analytic Philosophy* (Sosa, 2013) and *Language Sciences* (Croom, 2015a), which both used this term as title of the issue), and earlier authors use a number of other labels: derogatory epithets, racial epithets, pejoratives, hate speech etc.

[4] The term 'slurs' is sometimes used in a broader sense that covers also those other categories of pejoratives, but the narrower sense is most frequent in the philosophical literature and it is the one employed throughout this chapter.

personal characteristics. She argues that the distinction between being derogated *qua* member of a group or *qua* individual is not clear enough to stipulate a semantic difference between slurs and personal derogatory terms. Similarly, Ashwell (2016) argues that gendered pejoratives, derogating individuals based on harmful gender stereotypes are not different than slurs, even though their denotation is not a social group. E.g. 'slut' does not refer to women *qua* women (the way 'kraut' refers to Germans *qua* Germans), but to an individual woman judged as sexually promiscuous; nonetheless, Ashwell argues, it is offensive to all women as such. Nunberg (2018) makes a stronger claim that the category of slurs cannot be defined based on semantic properties. 'Slur', according to him, is itself a thick term, combining description and evaluation: whether a given term counts as a slur is a matter of whether its use is considered to be morally objectionable, and not merely offensive.[5] In a similar vein, Davis and McCready (2020) and Cousens (2020) argue that slurs are distinguished from other pejoratives because they specifically target oppressed groups. Bolinger (2020) considers situations in which speakers disagree whether a given term is a slur or not, reflecting on both linguistic and moral considerations.

The category of slurs may also be diverse. Many authors note that slurs, even coreferential ones, vary in the degree of their offensiveness (Hom, 2008; Anderson and Lepore, 2013a; Whiting, 2013; Popa-Wyatt, 2016; Bolinger, 2017), e.g. 'faggot' seems more offensive than 'fairy'. Jeshion (2013a) and Nunberg (2018) observe that some derogatory terms stereotype subsets of a group in a way that may not offend the group as a whole, and therefore should be distinguished from slurs proper. Examples include "Uncle Tom" or "Jewish American Princess". *Pace* Ahswell (2016), Nunberg suggests that disparaging words for women such as 'slut' belong to this category.

While most authors delimit the category of slurs based on their semantic or pragmatic properties, Diaz Legaspe (2019) and Pullum (2018) propose to include also lexicographic ones, especially register.

Extensive lists of examples are given in Bach (2018) and Saka (2007), though the latter does not distinguish between slurs in a narrower sense and other pejoratives.

25. 3 Properties of slurs

The following subsections concern properties of slurs that can be considered to be most important, either because they are generally accepted or widely discussed. These are ordered from least to most controversial.

25. 3. 1 Derogation, offensiveness, and complicity

Slurs derogate and offend their referents, and at the same time derogate and offend the entire target group. In whatever way the nature of the derogation is explicated, it is generally agreed that it targets not only the individual referent, but the group to which the referent belongs (although some accounts place more stress on the offense to the specific addressee or referent, e.g. Richard, 2008; Bolinger, 2017). Group derogation is the essential property distinguishing slurs from other pejoratives (but see section 25. 2 for discussion).

[5] Note that this only concerns the term 'slur', but not actual slurs, which Nunberg argues are not similar to thick terms. On the contrary, Cepollaro and Stojanovic, 2016 offer a unified analysis for slurs and evaluative thick terms. On evaluativity and thickness in general see also Cepollaro et al. [this volume].

Slurs are also offensive in another sense: using slurs is considered a transgression (see especially Anderson and Lepore, 2013a,b; cf. Nunberg, 2018), and the hearers, even if not themselves targets or members of the target group may, and perhaps should (see Bolinger, 2017 on warranted offense) take offense. These two senses – offense to targets and offense to hearers – are rarely distinguished clearly, but see Hom (2008, 2012), Hom and May (2013). Hom and May argue that offensiveness is a psychological phenomenon, to be distinguished from derogation which is part of slurs' semantic meaning (presumably, they mean offensiveness to hearers in the former instance, and offensiveness to targets in the latter). The offense resulting from any use of a slur accounts on their view for the appearance of projection of derogatory content (see section 25. 3. 2). Camp (2013) discusses offensiveness in this sense and suggests it is not clear what its relation to the semantic content of slurs is. Anderson and Lepore's (2013a,b) theory of Prohibitionism is exclusively concerned with offensiveness in a non-semantic sense, although it is not construed psychologically in their account: the offensiveness of slurs results from a violation of a social norm (and therefore slurs are offensive to whoever cares about the norm). Note that while Hom and May and Bolinger discuss actual offense that may, or may not, be taken by hearers of slurs, most authors treat offensiveness as an abstract property attached to the derogatory meaning of slurs rather than their actual conversational effect.

Another property of slurs closely related to offense taken by hearers is that they provoke a feeling of *complicity*: even recalcitrant hearers feel complicit in the slur-users' derogation of the target, unless they explicitly protest or distance themselves from it. It is possible to construe the complicity effect as an extra-linguistic, sociological or psychological phenomenon (perhaps an aspect of offensiveness as in Hom and May's account), and some theories may not be able to account for it (Cepollaro, 2015 suggests that this is the case for Schlenker's 2007 presuppositional theory). However, the complicity effect is predominantly thought to be an important property of slurs and their derogatory meaning (see Croom, 2011; Anderson and Lepore, 2013a; DiFranco, 2014; Blakemore, 2015; Nunberg 2018); for Richard (2008), Camp (2013), or Cepollaro (2015) it is one of the main explananda for a successful theory of slurs. Yet another closely related property of slurs may be their *toxicity* – the capacity to provoke intense emotional reactions – as discussed by Rappaport (2019, 2020).

25. 3. 2 Projection

The derogatory content of slurs tends to project or "escape" out of embeddings under negation or modals, in conditionals, attitude reports etc. Thus, "Abdul may be a Paki", "He is not a Paki", "If he is a Paki, he should go home", and "Becky thought he was a Paki" all derogate Pakistani people just as much as "Abdul is a Paki". Slurs exbibit especially strong projective behavior (Croom, 2011; Camp, 2013; Jeshion, 2013a, b; DiFranco, 2014; Bolinger 2017), even compared with other pejoratives (see Hay. 2013; on projective behavior of expressive content more broadly see Potts, 2007; on projection in general Simons et al., 2010). They may be offensive even when quoted (Anderson and Lepore, 2013a, b; Camp, 2013). Cf. Cepollaro et al. (2019) and Tenchini and Frigerio, 2020 for empirical studies of the projective behavior of slurs (and other pejoratives) in indirect reports.

Projection of the derogatory content of slurs is generally accepted and it is one of the main motivations for two-component theories, especially ones employing the concepts of conventional implicature or presupposition, which are both by definition

projective categorie. However, Hom and May (2013, 2018) reject the evidence in favor of projection, treating it as a sign of offensiveness (which they construe as a psychological phenomenon; cf. 25. 3. 1 above) which they distinguish from semantically engendered derogation. They also point to examples in which projection appears to fail. Cepollaro and Thommen (2019) respond to Hom and May's arguments and propose that the examples in which projection seems to fail should be understood as metalinguistic uses (or mentions) of slurs. E.g. in "Chani is not a kike, she's Jewish", the derogatory content of 'kike' does not project (i.e. the speaker need not be taken to derogate Jews).

25. 3. 3 Derogatory/expressive autonomy

The derogatory content of a slur is autonomous, or independent, of the attitudes of the speaker (Hom, 2008; Anderson and Lepore, 2013a): even if the speaker does not actually hold a negative attitude towards the slur's target, or perhaps intends to convey something positive about them, the slur remains equally offensive (and so "I have nothing but respect for chinks." still derogates Chinese people, even if it is uttered sincerely).

This property of slurs, labeled derogatory or expressive autonomy, may seem intuitive, but it is unclear how it should be interpreted and whether it should be accommodated in a theory of slurs. Croom (2011, 2013) explicitly rejects derogatory autonomy, arguing that slurs can be used in non-derogatory ways, and a theoretical account should be general enough to capture all kinds of uses. However, most authors distinguish those non-derogatory uses as special or non-literal (in Jeshion's 2013a terminology), which makes it possible to preserve derogatory autonomy for the "standard", paradigmatic cases (see section 25. 6. 1 on reclamation).

Derogatory autonomy is sometimes considered to be a problematic property for expressivist accounts of slurs (cf. Hom, 2008; Camp, 2013): if some instances of slur-use are derogatory even though they do not actually express any occurrent attitudes, the expressivist faces the challenge of explaining what the source of derogation is. Jeshion (2013a) undertakes this challenge, and defends an expressivist approach to slurs, arguing that even in such instances, hearers could be correct in presuming that the slur-using speaker harbors and expresses a negative attitude towards the slur's target.

25. 3. 4 Neutral counterparts

Slurs refer to individuals and social groups that can otherwise be referred to in inoffensive and respectful ways. Most theoreticians claim, or tacitly assume, that for every slur there exists a neutral counterpart denoting the very group that is the target of the slur. This is a weak form of what may be called the neutral counterpart thesis and as such it has rarely been challenged with the notable exception of Ashwell (2016), who argues that gendered pejoratives like 'slut' should be considered to be slurs in a proper sense, even though there is no group of 'sluts' that could be picked out in an inoffensive way (the very fact that someone is identified as a target of disapproval because of sexual promiscuity is in itself offensive).

More controversial is the stronger version of the neutral counterpart thesis: that slurs and their neutral counterparts are coreferential or coextensive. In two-component theories (see 25. 4. 2 and 25. 5. 2. 1 below) the truth-conditional component of the meaning of a slur is typically assumed to be identical to the neutral counterpart.

Furthermore, some pragmatic theories (Anderson and Lepore, 2013a, b; Bolinger, 2017; Nunberg, 2018; see 25. 5. 2. 2 below) assume the identity of semantic content *simpliciter* of slur and neutral counterpart.

The idea that there is a shared meaning between a slur and its neutral counterpart that can be separated from its derogatory or offensive component is closely linked to the issue of truth value of slurring statements. If one accepts it, a sentence such as "David is a jap" may be taken to express a proposition that is true or false depending on whether David is Japanese, independently of its offensiveness. For this reason, some theoreticians reject the neutral counterpart claim in its stronger version, because they claim that such sentences cannot express true propositions (Hom, 2008; Hom and May, 2013) or even true-or-false propositions (Richard, 2008; Hedger 2012, 2013). Note that these authors are not at the same time committed to rejecting the weaker version of the claim, because they deny that slurs actually denote the groups they purport to derogate (e.g. 'kike' derogates Jews, but it does not refer to Jews, because Jews are not actually what the slur user imagines them to be).

Croom (2015c) rejects the assumption of coreferentiality for different reasons, invoking evidence that in actual use slurs often have different extensions than their supposed neutral counterparts (e.g. 'faggot' is used to insult manifestly heterosexual men, while 'nigger' may be used only to derogate some, but not all, African-Americans). DiFranco (2015) argues that slurs with specific stereotypical or iconic meanings (e.g. 'slanty-eyed', 'Jewish-American Princess', 'ching-chong') do not have coreferential counterparts. Caso and LoGuercio (2016) respond to DiFranco arguing that the phenomena he cites are extra-semantic and should not be taken as evidence against coreferentiality. (Note also that many of DiFranco's examples are the kind of special slurring terms that Jeshion 2013a and Nunberg 2018 claim should be distinguished from slurs proper; see section 25. 2)

25. 3. 5 Stereotypes

Slurs seem obviously associated with negative and harmful stereotypes concerning the targeted groups. Some authors propose to treat the expression or implication of such stereotypes as part of the semantics of slurs, most notably Hom (2008), Hom and May (2013) and Williamson (2009) (see also Tirrell 1999). Jeshion (2013b) argues against such proposals, noting the implausibility of descriptive stereotypes being encoded in the semantics of slurs, as well as the fact that it seems possible for a slur-user to deny any specific stereotype about the targeted group, while still successfully derogating its members.

25. 4 Semantic theories of slurs

Most philosophical theories of slurs fall into two broad camps: semantic theories which explain the characteristic properties of slurs and their derogatory and offensive meanings in light of their semantic content; and pragmatic theories which account for those properties with reference to non-semantic mechanisms.[6] Nonetheless, there are

[6] The division is to some extent arbitrary. It seems customary nowadays to consider conventional implicature a semantic category and presupposition a pragmatic one, and so I classify theories employing one or the other concept accordingly. Note, however, that Williamson (1999) treats conventional implicature as a pragmatic notion, while García-Carpintero (2017) considers presupposition to be a semantic one.

many finer distinctions to be drawn within each camp. This section surveys semantic theories, and section 25. 5, pragmatic theories of slurs.

25. 4 .1 Misrepresentation and null extensionality

There is a strong intuition that slurs fundamentally misrepresent their targets. Calling someone a 'nigger' or 'faggot' distorts their identity as, respectively, African-American or gay, in some important – and deeply offensive – way, representing them as inferior or contemptible because of it. Some theorists take this to be an essential intuition about the linguistics of slurs. Thus, Richard (2008) argues that slurs are purely expressive and make no other semantic contribution than a hateful or contemptuous misrepresentation of their target (and so they do not refer to their targets, even though they derogate them). A similar view is defended by Hedger (2012, 2013), based on the Kaplanian distinction between descriptive and expressive content (cf. Kaplan, 1999). Hedger argues that the projective behavior of slurs along with the fact that non-bigoted speakers are often reluctant to assess the truth of utterances containing slurs indicate that these words have only expressive content. The consequence is that all sentences containing slurs lack truth value (Richard) or are not truth-apt at all (Hedger). Pure expressivism of this sort has been criticized by Croom (2014c), who argues that it incorrectly assimilates slurs to expletives (cf. Blakemore, 2015) and cannot account for the fact that slurs are applied differentially (e.g. 'gook' and 'slut' are not applied to the same targets; therefore, they must differ in some descriptive content).

Hom (2008, 2012), and Hom and May (2013, 2018) propose a different way of accounting for the intuition that slur-users are deeply wrong about their targets. On their view, slurs have a truth-conditional content which is functionally related, but not identical, to the content of their neutral counterparts. The functional relationship is represented by the operator PEJ(x); thus, for instance the meaning of 'kike' is PEJ(*Jew*). The specific content of each slur is determined externally by racist institutions and practices, and involves descriptive stereotypes and normative judgments, all supposedly based on the target's identity. Thus, the meaning of 'chink' is something like "ought to be subject to higher college admissions standards, and ought to be subject to exclusion from advancement to managerial positions, and …, because of being slanty-eyed, and devious, and good-at-laundering, and …, all because of being Chinese." The consequence of this truth-conditional treatment is that slurs have a *null extension*. Quite obviously, no one ought to be subjected to any kind of discrimination on account of their race, ethnicity, sexuality etc., and therefore no one, on Hom and May's account, falls in the extension of slurs.

Hom and May's view is among the most influential and widely debated in the philosophical literature on slurs, but it has met with overwhelmingly critical reactions. Sennet and Copp (2015), and Cepollaro and Thommen (2019) make the case against the truth-conditional account of slurs most explicitly, citing numerous difficulties it faces (see also Camp, 2018). Most importantly, it cannot account for the apparent projective behavior of slurs (see 25. 3. 2 above), and it has counterintuitive implications regarding the truth of many sentences; e.g. "All kikes are Mormons" is a necessary truth on this account. Moreover, on Hom and May's view, to call someone with a slur is to express a moral claim, but even if the claim is obviously false, it is not equivalent to derogating someone, so the source of the offensiveness of slurs is unclear. Diaz-Leon (2020) defends Hom and May's truth-conditional account of slurs, but argues that it should be understood as a version of inferentialist semantics.

25. 4. 2 Two-component approaches

Many theorists assume that slurs make a truth-conditional contribution to the sentences in which they appear (*contra* pure expressivists), but this contribution should be distinguished and separated from any factors responsible for derogation and offense (*contra* Hom and May). The latter factors may be construed semantically, or pragmatically – for the latter, see section 25. 5, esp. 25. 5. 2. Semantic theories distinguish two components in the semantic content of slurs, one of which is the at-issue, truth-conditional one (usually assumed to be identical to the content of a neutral counterpart of the slur). What these theories differ on is how the other component is construed.

Williamson (2009) and Bach (2018) propose versions of what may be called two-component descriptivism. Williamson construes the derogatory (not-at-issue) component of a slur's meaning as a conventional implicature with some specific stereotypical content (e.g. 'Boche' conventionally implicates that Germans are cruel, which is an offensive stereotype). Bach proposes a "loaded descriptivism", which takes sentences with slurs to express secondary propositional contents (based on the multi-propositional view developed in Bach, 1999). This secondary proposition attributes some unspecific negative evaluative property to the slur's target. Note that on both Williamson's and Bach's proposal the secondary content of slurs is not-at-issue, but it is truth-conditional.

In contrast to these descriptivist proposals, many semantic theorists of slurs favor what may be called "hybrid expressivism".[7] On such a view, the "other", not-at-issue component of a slur's meaning is not descriptive and not truth-conditional, but expresses a non-cognitive attitude towards the slur's targets (it is usually left unspecified what exactly the attitude is; it is plausible that slur-users may express different attitudes – hate, contempt, condescension, dislike, etc. – with the same slur). With regard to the theoretical status of this component, most proponents of hybrid expressivism treat it as a conventional implicature; see Potts (2007), Copp (2009), McCready (2010), Whiting (2013). Croom (2011) rejects the conception of conventional implicature, but proposes a very similar view. In its different varieties (among which one could also count some of the presuppositional theories discussed in 25. 5. 2), hybrid expressivism may be considered the dominant view in the philosophical literature on slurs. It articulates what appears to be an important intuition about slurs: that their contribution to an utterance lies not just in what is said, but in how it is said – and that the how-component has more to do with negative attitudes and emotions towards the targets than any specific true or false proposition.

Bach (2018) criticizes hybrid expressivist views for several reasons. First, they entail that there is no difference in what is said between saying that someone is a "Jew" or that someone is a "kike" (or a difference in what is believed between believing the former and believing the latter). And thus, proponents of this view would have to accept as true that anyone who is a Jew is a kike, even though saying so or calling someone a 'kike' is derogatory. Second, hybrid expressivism seems to reverse the proper order of explanation: according to Bach, slurs are used to express contempt because they impute contemptibility to their targets, and not the other way around. Third, hybrid expressivism makes wrong predictions concerning slurs in attitude reports. "Dick thought that Henry was a kraut" may be an accurate report of Dick's thought and need not commit the speaker to derogation of Germans in general or Henry

[7] "Hybrid expressivism" is a term borrowed from metaethics, and it seems to have been first applied in a discussion of slurs by Hay (2013). There may be important differences between the hybrid accounts of slurs mentioned here and any specific metaethical positions, but the label is useful.

in particular. But on the hybrid expressivist view, the derogatory content should always project, and therefore the speaker would be responsible for the offensive content. Jeshion (2017) defends hybrid expressivism against Bach's criticism, and argues that it is a more parsimonious and adequate account.

A noteworthy variant of hybrid expressivism was proposed by Jeshion (2013a), who outlines a three-component semantics for slurs. Besides the two components common to hybrid expressivist views: a truth-conditional one, and an expressivist one, she adds an "identifying" component. A speaker using a slur to express contempt for its target thereby also represents the target's membership in the derogated group as fundamental to their identity as a person. The identifying and expressivist components together account for slurs' conventional capacity to derogate and offend.

25. 5 Pragmatic theories of slurs

25. 5. 1 Criticisms of semantic approaches

Anderson and Lepore (2013a,b), and Nunberg (2018) have criticized semantic approaches in general, as well as specific proposals (especially Hom and May's truth-conditional account and the various conventional implicature theories); see also Camp (2018) for arguments against a variety of semantic theories, although she proposes a semantic account herself. The main arguments are as follows. First, semantic theories do not account for non-derogatory uses of slurs, e.g. reclaimed uses by members of the target communities (see below, section 25. 6. 1 on reclamation) and cannot explain the variation in slurs' offensiveness (cf. Bolinger, 2017). Second, they fail to strictly distinguish slurs from other kinds of pejoratives, evaluative thick terms or swear-words. Third, they reduce the offensiveness of slurs to the individual beliefs, or non-cognitive attitudes, of slur-users, thereby obscuring their embedding in discriminatory social practices and discourses.

It should be noted that many of the features Anderson and Lepore and Nunberg criticize in semantic accounts are not considered problematic by the authors of these theories themselves. Thus, for instance, Jeshion (2013a) explicitly places non-derogatory uses outside of the scope of her explanation, because she considers them to be non-literal, while Potts (2007) and McCready (2010) propose general accounts of expressive content which are intended to cover slurs as well as other kinds of expressions.

25. 5. 2 Presuppositional theories

Presuppositional accounts of slurs have been proposed by Macià (2002), Schlenker (2007), Cepollaro (2015, 2016), Cepollaro and Stojanovic (2016), García-Carpintero (2017), Marques and García-Carpintero (2020). These are similar in spirit to the two-component semantic approaches discussed in section 25. 4. 2, and can be considered a variety of hybrid expressivism: slurs on this view have two meaning components, an at-issue (truth-conditional) one, identical to that of neutral counterparts, and a derogatory one. The important difference is that the latter is construed as presupposition, and not conventional implicature or some other semantic category.

An important advantage of presuppositional accounts over semantic ones is that they may be better suited to account for the effect of complicity (see section 25. 3. 1 above). If the derogatory content of a slur is introduced as presupposition it may have the effect of a presumption that the hearer shares the negative attitude or evaluation of

the target group. Cepollaro (2015) distinguishes two ways in which the presupposition can be construed (a similar distinction is present in Predelli, 2010): a subjective and an objective one. The subjective option (which seems to be preferred by Predelli, as well as Schlenker, 2007) is that the presupposition expresses the speaker's contempt for the target group. The objective option is that the presupposition presents the group as contemptible (Cepollaro and Stojanovic, 2016 and García-Carpintero, 2017 favor the objective option).

Presuppositional theories have been criticized by Anderson and Lepore (2013a), and Camp (2018) among others. The most important problem is that most presuppositions are subject to certain filters, but slurs are not. E.g. 'say'-reports and conditionals filter out presuppositions (stop them from projecting). García-Carpintero (2017) proposes to solve this problem by reinterpreting the presuppositions of slurs as introducing normative requirements on the shared context (cf. García-Carpintero, 2015).

25. 5. 3 Socially determined offensiveness

Anderson and Lepore (2013a,b), Bolinger (2017) and Nunberg (2018) offer different pragmatic theories of slurs which share two basic claims: first, that the literal content of slurs is identical to the content of their neutral counterparts and therefore slurs' offensiveness is not a result of any semantic (or presuppositional) mechanism; second, that the offensiveness of slurs is determined by their functioning in social contexts.

Anderson and Lepore propose to understand the offensiveness of slurs as a function of their taboo status: there are social norms in place that prohibit the use of slurring terms (hence they call this theory Prohibitionism); any utterance of a slur is a violation of such a norm. Such a violation is offensive to anyone who cares about the norm (i.e. any non-bigoted person), but especially to the targets. People have a right to choose what the respectable ways of calling and addressing them are, and so groups, especially disadvantaged ones, have the right to ban certain words as offensive. Slurs are not offensive because of any content they convey, but because they are prohibited. Prohibitionism has been criticized by Jeshion (2013a), Bianchi (2014), Camp (2018), and Nunberg (2018), among others. Its main weaknesses, according to the critics, are that it does not distinguish between the kind of offense caused by slur-uses and other offensive acts of taboo-breaking (e.g. swear words), or between the offense to targets of slurs and to hearers; it does not explain why a particular word should be prohibited (intuitively, for a prohibition to be instituted, the word should already be perceived as offensive); and it does not capture the actual variability of slurs' projective behavior, predicting that every tokening (even in quotation) is offensive.

Like Anderson and Lepore, Nunberg also reverses the usual order of explanation, arguing that slurs are not used by bigots because they are offensive, but they are offensive because they are the words used by bigots. It is conventional among racists, anti-Semites, homophobes etc. to use words such as 'nigger', 'kike', or 'faggot' to refer to the targets of their contempt. Therefore, anyone who uses one of these words is affiliating themselves with bigots and the discriminatory attitudes and practices that they promote. Nunberg describes this mechanism as a special kind of conversational (rather than conventional) implicature.

Bolinger develops a similar view, but based on a different mechanism. The offensiveness of slurs on Bolinger's account is a function of the contrastive choice made by a speaker between a slurring term and a neutral alternative. Through this choice, the speaker signals that he or she endorses the appropriateness of the slurring

term and its associations. The content of this signal is determined by co-occurrence expectations (a concept borrowed from politeness theory, cf. Terkourafi, 2005): slur uses regularly co-occur with contexts in which derogatory attitudes are expressed. Another similar view is proposed by Hess (2020b) who introduces a notion of expressive commitments to connect individual uses of slurs to practices of bigotry while simultaneously accounting for derogatory autonomy.

25. 5. 4 Slurs and speech acts

A number of authors have proposed accounts of the discursive contribution of slurs in terms of speech act theory (see e.g. Anderson et al., 2012; Langton, 2012; Bianchi, 2018; Popa-Wyatt and Wyatt, 2018). Utterances containing slurs have characteristic effects both as perlocution and illocution: as perlocutionary acts, they cause harm to targets; as illocutionary ones, they constitute it. Moreover, beyond insulting or offending the targets, slurring utterances may also have the effect of subordinating and silencing them. Note that these accounts have more to do with understanding slurs as devices of hate speech than with theories of derogatory and offensive meaning.

A different speech act-based theory of slurs is proposed by Camp (2018) in the form of what she dubs a "dual act analysis" of slurs. On Camp's account, when a slur is used in an utterance it contributes to two distinct speech acts. On the one hand, it predicates group membership and thereby makes a compositional (truth-conditional) contribution to a core proposition which may be asserted, asked, ordered etc, (This contribution may be considered equivalent to that of a neutral counterpart). On the other hand, it contributes to a derogatory speech act, which may be further analyzed as expressing a negative attitude or endorsing a pejorative perspective. The advantage of conceptualizing these two different contributions as the contents of different speech acts, rather than as at-issue content and implicated or presupposed content, Camp argues, is that it does not entail which of these acts must be primary or basic in a given speech situation: quite often the main point of a slurring utterance is the derogation of the target and not the non-derogatory part of content. According to Camp, other theories fail to account for that. Tenchini and Frigerio (2016) develop another variant of a multi-act account.

25. 6 Particular issues

The nature and (semantic or pragmatic) mechanisms of derogatory meaning and offensiveness are at the center of the philosophical debate on slurs, but other issues are also discussed. The most important of them is reclamation of slurs.

25. 6. 1 Reclamation

Slurs can sometimes be used by members of the target groups (and more rarely, by other speakers) in non-derogatory ways. This phenomenon is typically referred to as 'reclamation', or '(re)appropriation' of slurs. The most well-known and widely discussed examples include the use of 'nigger' (typically in the spelling and phonetic variant 'nigga') among African-American speakers, especially in artistic contexts (in hip-hop music, film, comedy, and literature), but also in vernacular use; and homophobic slurs such as 'dyke', 'fag', 'gay', or 'queer'. The latter two are especially interesting as in many contexts they seem entirely free of any derogatory associations

– consider, for instance, "queer theory" – even though they can still sometimes be used by bigoted speakers in an intentionally derogatory way. (Compare this with 'Mormon', which originated as term of ridicule for members of the LDS Church, but today retains no offensive associations at all.)

Reclamation is sometimes considered to be problematic for semantic theories of slurs (see Anderson and Lepore, 2013a). The very fact that some slurs can be used with different meanings is not in itself difficult to account for (cf. Potts, 2007; Hom, 2008; Camp, 2013; Jeshion 2013a). However, what may be puzzling is that non-derogatory uses are generally only available to the members of the group targeted by a given slur ('gay' or 'queer' may be exceptions – perhaps indicating that a historical process of reclamation is more advanced in these cases – but slurs such as 'nigga', 'fag', 'bitch', and many others obey this restriction). Ritchie, 2017 responds to this so-called Reclamation Worry by stipulating that the lexical meaning of a reclaimed slur includes a hidden indexical 'we', which makes it impossible to be used felicitously by an out-group speaker. Cepollaro (2017) criticizes Ritchie's view and offers an alternative, non-semantic account of reclaimed slurs based on concepts from Relevance Theory (cf. Wilson and Sperber, 2012). She argues that reclaimed uses are "echoic" in nature – they are ironic or subversive re-uses of derogatory slurs. Bianchi (2014) also offers an echoic account of reclaimed slurs.

Reclamation is an intriguing topic in and of itself, regardless of its importance for the evaluation of semantic theories of slurs. The growing body of literature concerning it cannot be adequately surveyed here. Only a few notable contributions will be mentioned (it should be noted that in this area philosophical and linguistic theorizing more strongly relies on and blends with empirical research). Bronstema (2004) discusses the question whether reclaimed uses of slurs can be entirely separated from their pejorative connotations, and the consequences of different answers to this question for the support of or opposition to reclamation. Beaton and Washington (2015) analyze reclamation applying the sociolinguistic concept of indexical field (cf. Eckert, 2008). In a series of articles, Croom (2014b, 2015b, 2018) discusses both derogatory and non-derogatory uses of specific slurs in English, Spanish and Native American languages. See also Kennedy (2003) and Asim (2007) on 'nigger' and 'nigga'; Curzan (2014) on reappropriation and prescriptivism; Herbert (2015) on the performative structure of reclamation; and Technau (2016) on contexts of use of reclaimed slurs. Cepollaro and Zeman (2020) is a collection of papers on reclamation of slurs. Among these, Hess (2020a) argues that default (derogatory) and reclaimed uses of slurs are embedded in different kinds of social practices, which may explain why reclaimed uses are often only available to in-group speakers. Jeshion (2020) and Popa-Wyatt (2020) consider the processes of reclamation of slurs; Jeshion distinguishes two main paths of pride reclamation (e.g. 'queer') and insular reclamation (e.g. 'nigga'), while Popa-Wyatt analyzes reclamation as a way of changing the distribution of power between social groups.

25. 6. 2 Other issues and approaches

In this subsection several other noteworthy contributions to the philosophical literature on slurs are briefly mentioned.

Camp (2013) addresses the question of what exactly the derogatory content of slurs is, as opposed to the question of the mechanism by which it is conveyed, and argues that what slurs communicate is a derogatory *perspective* on the target group, where a perspective is an open-ended way of thinking and feeling that structures a subject's thoughts.

Predelli (2013) and Gutzmann (2015) present accounts of slurs within a broader framework of expressive content construed as *use-conditional meaning*. Their differing accounts share the central idea that the meaning of categories such as slurs (and many others) is defined through reference to contexts in which their use is appropriate, rather than contexts in which the propositions they contribute to are true. This makes them close to Hedger's (2012, 2013) expressivism.

Miščević (2015) and Jeshion (2016) undertake the topic of diachronic development and creation of slurs.

Hom and May (2018) argue that because slurs have no extension, they are a species of fictional terms. Slurs are supported by pernicious ideologies (e.g. anti-Semitism) that lead people to mistake ordinary individuals (Jews) for fictional entities ("kikes") who are worthy of contempt. This fictionalist account is criticized by Marques (2017), who argues that the analogy between slurs and fictional terms is misleading, as the latter have certain uses that do not commit the speaker to the truth of the fiction, while analogous slur-uses commit the speaker to a racist ideology.

Several authors investigate the issue of the relation between slurs and slur-use and social contexts of power relations, unjust institutions and ideologies, see Corredor (2014), Swanson (forthcoming), Kukla (2018), Popa-Wyatt and Wyatt (2018). One of the important topics undertaken in these contributions is that uses of slurs both rely on and support unjust power relations and harmful ideologies.[8]

Lepore and Stone (2018) undertake the issue of what and how speakers communicate with slurs, focusing on the interpretive processes and inferential reasoning through which hearers engage with slurring utterances. They argue that a general interpretation of slurring terms is impossible.

Neufeld (2019) and Burnett (2020) propose novel semantic theories of slurs. Neufeld develops an essentialist model of the meaning of slurs, arguing that they are a category of kind terms, encoding mini-theories representing supposedly essential characteristics of the target group and causal connections between these characteristics and negative evaluations. Burnett proposes a "persona-based semantics" in which both slurs and their supposed neutral counterparts are associated with different sets of personae or abstract identities. These associations may be different for in-group (reclaimed) uses.

Davis and McCready (2020) discuss acts of slurring that may be performed with the use of expressions other than semantic slurs; in particular they analyze the slurring use of deadnames and improperly gendered pronouns when referring to trans people.

In conclusion, it should be noted that while philosophical theorizing on slurs has seen substantial progress in the recent years, illuminating the meaning and properties of these problematic expressions in multiple ways, many questions remain open and novel theoretical approaches are still possible. The current chapter presents only a snapshot of the state of literature that is still growing and expanding.

[8] On the use of the concept of ideology in linguistics, see also Cap (this volume).

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