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SLURS AND MEANING

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Slurs and Meaning

ABSTRACT: This essay examines the semantics-pragmatics divide in some recent articles about slurs. The semantic accounts suggesting a hybrid semantic meaning as well as the accounts that wish to include the notion of linguistic competence in semantic meaning are examined and found to have trouble finding a theoretically elegant explanation of the meaning of slurs. The deflationary pragmatic accounts examined are, in contrast, found to not have enough explanatory power to fully account for some of what are generally thought to be slurs' primary functions in language. Therefore, the essay concludes on the note that perhaps none of these recent accounts examined are to prefer above the other in explaining the meaning of slurs, and that it might be suggested that an account of slurs that utilize pragmatics to describe many of the elements of slurs outlined in semantic accounts may fare better by valuing these pragmatic elements as primary in the interpretation of a slur's meaning.

1. Introduction

In the recent debate about slurs, opposing camps have formed where the debaters generally conform to either semantic or pragmatic accounts of slurs. What they disagree on is whether it is the slur's semantic or pragmatic meaning that causes the offensive and/or insulting effects that occur when a slur is uttered. Classically, the distinction between semantic and pragmatic meaning isolate semantic meaning as the truth-conditional content of a word, whereas pragmatic meaning includes meanings interpreted from the word's use in context. The phrase "the cat is on the mat" is true *iff* the cat is on the mat. This is the phrase's truth-conditional, semantic meaning. The same phrase could be used to tell your roommate that their muddy pet is leaving stains on your pristine white rug. That would then belong to the phrase's pragmatic meaning.

Generally, the proponents of a semantic point of view of slurs propose an inflation of what the concept of semantic meaning should include, arguing for the addition of extra elements to the classic notion of semantic truth-conditional meaning. Those who support a pragmatic account of slurs' offensive and/or harmful effects deny that any aspect of these effects derives from semantic meaning. Pragmatic accounts generally conform to the classic distinction between semantics and pragmatics, and argue that elements of their *use* rather than components of their semantic meaning solely causes slurs' offensiveness. Although those who support a semantic point of view agree that part of, or most, of the offense or hurt caused by slurs actually derives from the *use* of the slur, they do not agree that slurs are

offensive *exclusively* because of pragmatic factors. Semantic accounts argue that pragmatics is not sufficient to account for slurs' offensive or hurtful effects.

In this essay I aim to review some of the recent contributions to the debate about slurs. I shall argue that the semantic accounts I look at seem to take more seriously the offensive and harmful effects of slurs in comparison to the pragmatic accounts. Conversely, the pragmatic accounts I review seem to do the opposite. After presenting these accounts on slur meaning, I will discuss the problems that they face, and suggest that maybe a re-valuing of semantic and pragmatic meaning might be able to avoid these.

Do note that I will write out some slurs in the essay that follows, knowing that even the mention of a slur is sometimes enough to cause insult or offense, as I believe that neglecting to present examples of the kind of words that are subject of this essay would be doing the seriousness of the topic a disservice. Naturally, when they do occur in this essay, it will be so only in mention and not in use.

1.2 Defining 'slur'

To begin the task set in this essay, we first need to get a sense of what a slur is. As evident from the semantic-pragmatic briefly outlined conflict above, this might provide an issue, since it is a dispute about slurs' meaning that is at the root of the issue. Is a slur offensive in and of itself, or is it a word that causes offense because of the ways it is used? In an attempt to at least clarify the role slurs play in language, I aim to first describe what most agree that slurs *do* (either when used or as automatically performed speech acts given their semantic meaning). I will then go on to discuss some things that slurs are not. By that point I aim to have clarified the concept of slurs enough for the reader to have a sense of what a slur is before delving in to the different accounts of the meaning of slurs.

Firstly, there is a general consensus that slurs are considered insulting and/or offensive when uttered in most contexts.[1] Not to all, I am sure, but for most they are words of the kind that are best left unspoken in polite company. And when at the receiving end of a slur or if we are in the group of people it targets, it is often perceived

[1] Of the articles I refer to in this essay, the one account that might be thought of as disagreeing with this point is found in Geoffrey Nunberg's "The Social Life of Slurs", *New Work on Speech Acts*, ed. Daniel Fogal, Daniel W. Harris and Matt Moss, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2018, pp. 237-294.

that the speaker somehow has committed an act of valuing the target group poorly, as somehow lesser or other than other humans. What exactly it is that causes a slur to have this effect is not agreed upon, causing the divide between semantic and pragmatic theories that shall be reviewed in the following sections. For now, I note that it is simply so that slurs are considered to have offensive effects, though accounts vary as to why and how.

By slurs' offensive effects I mean the fact that they in most situations can cause hearers to feel offended, insulted, poorly valued, or hurt. Again, there is not much agreement within philosophy of language as to how and why these effects come to be. I therefore aim use the very vague notion of 'slurs' offensiveness' as a form of shorthand to include all and any of these effects, so as they are agreed upon to exist by most parties in the debate.

Secondly, there is a general consensus in the debate that slurs are words that single out a group of humans (or one person as part of a group) based upon some shared characteristic or defining trait. These may include gender, race, sexuality, ethnicity and similar factors.[2] It can also have to do with country of origin, one of the more frequent examples being 'chink' for people of Chinese origin. Most of the articles I shall bring attention to also agree that slur words have insulting, derogating, distancing, or devaluing effects when used to describe another person. There is a sense in which the slur is seen as an imposing an undeserved or unjust description upon their targets.[3]

However not all agree that derogatory words that apply particularly to women or that denote feminine characteristics are in fact to be counted as slurs, examples of these are 'slut', 'bitch', 'pussy', 'witch', and similar terms.[4] This because some consider derogative words that signal femininity or that the target is female to not be derogative to the set of all female or feminine persons.[5] I, however, do not see how this conclusion is drawn, as they, to me, signal a devaluing of femaleness or

[2] Some disagreement exists on the grounds of what kind of social groups that can be included in the set of slurs, see for example Justina Diaz-Legaspe's "What is a slur?", *Philosophical Studies*, 2019-02-18, https://doi-org.ezproxy.ub.gu.se/10.1007/s11098-019-01259-3, accessed 2020-01-14, p. 2.
[3] Kent Bach, "Loaded Words. On the Semantics and Pragmatics of Slurs", *Bad Words. Philosophical Perspectives on Slurs*, ed. David Sosa, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2018, p. 72.
[4] Kent Bach, for example, seems to consider slurs against women to be "personal" and "character"-related, used for people who are "worse than annoying". Bach, p. 75.
[5] Diaz-Legaspe in her article points out that many accounts of slurs are unsatisfactory in that they do not include gendered slurs, which I too have found to be the case across almost all accounts of slurs studied for this essay. Diaz-Legaspe, p. 12.

femininity much in the same way as a racial slur devalues on the basis of racial factors. If Steven or Lisa are bad at playing sports and is therefore being called 'pussy' by their peers, this is an example of where a word denoting female or feminine defining characteristics is used to imply that a person having these traits is somehow lesser valued than those that do not. To me, the use of such words is therefore clearly offensive to all women and feminine persons, as the idea of feminine or female defining traits is being used to imply or explain a person's perceived shortcomings. This might seem like a digression, but I find that it singles out an important aspect of why slurs are commonly thought to be offensive: they seem to be able to be derogative not only towards the person it is aimed at, but also toward the whole group of individuals it denotes.[6]

Furthermore, it is commonly argued that there to most slurs seems to exist what is called a 'neutral counterpart', that is to say, a word that denotes the same group of people but which will not garner negative attention when uttered, as it is considered commonplace and neutral as opposed to derogative.[7] In Swedish, an example of a slur/neutral counterpart pairing would be 'Lapp' as opposed to the more neutral 'Same' to denote a person of the Sámi population.

What is also commonly agreed upon is that a slur does not *always* have the same effect when spoken: the prime example being that in some predominantly African American communities where 'nigga' can be successfully used if not affectionally, then neutrally.[8] This last point exemplifies an issue within the debate about slurs that we shall return to it later as it poses a problem for some of the semantic accounts. For now, we shall be content with the fact that most agree that it matters not only *that* a slur is spoken, but also *who* it is that utters it, and that slurs in some situations may be uttered without any offensive effects.

Moreover, slurs are also fairly commonly said to reflect upon the speaker's person, which in turn may lead the hearer to draw conclusions about the speaker. An interesting and somewhat related characteristic that Elisabeth Camp and Kent Bach

[6] A similar reasoning is found in Robin Jeshion's, "Slurs, Dehumanization, and the Expression of Contempt", *Bad Words. Philosophical Perspectives on Slurs*, ed. David Sosa, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2018, pp. 77-107.

[7] At this point in the essay, I suspend judgement on whether or not it is the slur itself or the use of a slur that is derogative.

[8] This issue is expanded upon in Luvell Anderson's "Calling, Addressing, and Appropriation", *Bad Words. Philosophical Perspectives on Slurs*, ed. David Sosa, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2018, pp. 6-28.

draw attention to is that slurs also seem to 'project' their offensiveness through reported speech.[9] Compare the following utterances:

1: "Anna said that she hates kikes."

2: "Anna said that she hates Jews."

In this example, it seems that while uttering (1) is offensive, the same cannot be said of if someone utters (2). There does seem to be, as Camp notes, some element of offense to be derived from the very fact that the speaker chooses to use the slur in their report of another's utterance, rather than a neutral alternative.[10] In this way, there seems to be a unique quality of slurs in that they remain offensive in reported speech.

Now that I've introduced some things that most agree that slurs do or at least cause, I wish to bring up some things that slurs, in my mind, do not do, and that they are not. Kent Bach, for example, draws a distinction between personal slurs and group slurs, where he considers words as diverse as "asshole", "lame ass", and "couch potato", to be "personal" slurs.[11] I, however, do not agree that his concept of personal slurs actually do belong to the group of slurs, as a common opinion is that slurs generally bring about some form of *undeserving* negative attention upon its targets, which is not the case in all instances of someone being called 'asshole'. As Bach himself says, there is nothing that "makes a Jew a kike".[12] But calling a Jewish person 'kike' might in the eyes of many qualify the speaker as deserving of the epithet 'asshole'.

Moreover, returning to the reasoning around slurs about women and femininity, it seems that considering these kinds of insults to be slurs amounts to a dilution of the concept. The words Bach call personal slurs do not import undeserved negative attention on anyone else than the one the word is directed at. True, such name-calling may be undeserved, but it does not reflect or purport a negative view of a group of humans, which as seen above could be considered to be an important characteristic of slurs. In my view, slurs are thus quite distinct from personal insults in that they have a

[9] Elizabeth Camp "A Dual Act Analysis of Slurs", *Bad Words. Philosophical Perspectives on Slurs*, ed. David Sosa, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2018, p. 36f; Bach p. 68.
[10] Ibid., p. 41-42.
[11] Bach, p. 61, 69, 75; Additionally, some words Bach names as personal slurs, such as "dyke" and "fag", are rather group slurs, in that their use is derogative to a whole group of persons rather than single targets.
[12] Ibid., p. 72.

quality of undeservedness about them, and are often derogative to the whole group of individuals it denotes rather than just a single target.

Furthermore, it is worth noting that although slurs in their offensiveness may seem related to expletives such as 'fuck', their inappropriateness is where the similarities end. According to Adam M. Croom, drawing from concepts outlined by Christopher Potts, swear words and the like fall in the family of expressives: words that serve only to express the state of mind or emotion of the speaker whereas slurs also communicate a contempt for the group of people that the target belongs to.[13] While some semantic accounts argue that slurs have components of meaning that make use of a similar kind of expressive element, most would have it that slurs are not 'simply' expressives, as that would not be enough to account for slurs' offensiveness.

In this section I have presented slurs as words that:

1. Cause offense and hurt when used.
2. Denote a certain group of humans.
3. Are derogating, hurtful, and unwarranted.
4. When aimed at a single target, is still derogative to the whole group it denotes.
5. Often have so-called neutral counterparts.
6. May not always be offensive, depending on who the speaker is.
7. Have an ability to project their offensive effects through reported speech.
8. Reflect upon the speaker's person.
9. Are not the same as regular insults directed at single targets.
10. Are not the same as expletives.

Even though on most points there are dissenters in the debate, there are to my knowledge no accounts that simultaneously deny all of them. Having established this list of slurs' general characteristics, we can move on to investigate how the semantic and pragmatic accounts differ in respect to which points they find to be most important in what slurs are and can do.

2. Semantic accounts of slurs

In this section I will present a selection of what I find to be the most interesting recent semantic accounts of slurs. What unites this kind of accounts is the view that the definition of semantic meaning as truth-conditional is not *enough* to describe slurs'

[13] Adam M. Croom "How to do things with slurs: Studies in the way of derogatory words", *Language and Communication* (2013:33), p. 178f.

linguistic function and effects. I shall begin by addressing the kind of semantic accounts that postulate additional contents of semantic meaning outside the truth-conditional element of slurs' meaning. After that I will follow with the kind of semantic account that wishes to expand the notion of semantic meaning to include a notion of linguistic competence necessary for comprehension. The kinds of semantic accounts of slurs mentioned here are not, with respect to space limitations, representative of all kinds of semantic accounts of slurs' meaning, but those that I find to best capture the characteristics of slurs listed in the previous section.[14]

To begin, I wish to give some of the reasons presented for arguing an expansion of truth-conditional semantics given by its proponents. One argument that Camp brings up, in turn borrowed from Bach, is that reports of speech that replace a slur with a neutral counterpart inaccurately represent the utterance it is reporting, as in Camp's example:

3: "Institutions that treat Chinese as chinks are racist."

Versus in reported speech:

3R: "Institutions that treat Chinese as Chinese are racist."

Thus, Camp argues, there is an element of a slur's meaning that is undeniably not present in its neutral counterpart.[15] Furthermore, Camp argues that any theory that treats a slur as truth-conditionally equivalent to its neutral counterpart cannot make sense of sentences like:

4: "I am Jewish, not a kike."

Or

5: " Jews are kikes."

[14] One article I have excluded is Christopher Hom and Robert May's account of slurs as fictional or extensionless, see Hom, Christopher, & May, Robert, "Pejoratives as Fiction", *Bad Words: Philosophical Perspectives on Slurs*, ed. David Sosa, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2018, pp. 108-131. This since I believe that it does not capture the extensional function of slurs, and as I do not share their view of fictionality and its function in language, which is far beyond the scope of this essay.
[15] Camp, p. 43.

Since (4) would then be contradictory despite making perfect sense, and (5) would be logically true, going against the commonly held view that 'kike' does not represent the exact same thing as 'Jew' does.[16] These examples from Camp highlight some of the issues with slurs that cause many to claim that there is a need for semantic accounts of slurs' offensive effects rather than a pragmatic one, due to there seeming to be something inescapably different in the meaning of a slur compared to other words that share the same extension.

2.1 Hybrid accounts

Of the more popular among the kind of theories postulating additional components to a slurs' semantic meaning are the 'hybrid expressivist' accounts. In general, these accounts divides slur's semantic meaning into two parts: one that designates group membership and that is equivalent to the word's neutral counterpart (filling the function of truth-conditional group-designating meaning), as well as another, expressive, part of additional semantic content that expresses the speaker's negative disposition toward the target group identified by the slur.[17] Hence the name *hybrid* expressivism. In this section I will review two accounts that are broadly hybrid expressivist, Jeshion's and Camp's, and one put forward by Bach that is based upon hybrid expressivism. Therefore I have chosen to group these as *hybrid* accounts since they are not altogether purely hybrid expressivist. What unites these accounts is that they argue for hybrid views of slurs' semantic meaning, where one part is truth-conditional and another element of semantic meaning that sets the slur apart from its neutral counterpart. I will use this section to give a brief overview of these accounts, and go over some of the problems they face in the next.

Robin Jeshion offers a variety of hybrid expressivism with the modification that she postulates yet another part of semantic content, which expresses the speaker's idea that the group designation expressed by the slur is the most important constituent of the slur target's identity, their most fundamental characteristic. In this way, Jeshion argues that one of the ways that slurs are derogative is that they reduce the target to a single identifying characteristic.[18]

[16] Camp, p. 43.
[17] Jeshion, p. 78.
[18] Ibid., p. 78-79.

Elisabeth Camp's "dual act"-theory also falls under the hybrid expressivist umbrella.[19] In her account there is the neutral counterpart-corresponding part of the slur as well as a second part that expresses that the speaker has certain perspectives (negative stereotype-based sets of propositions that are not necessarily precisely defined) about the slur's target.[20] Camp argues that the additional expressive element of meaning present in slurs "may affect truth-value" of utterances in comparison to utterances that instead contain a neutral counterpart.[21] What separates Camp from other hybrid expressivists is that she proposes both elements to be equally important to a slur's truth-conditional meaning, but being primary or secondary according to context of utterance.[22]

Another variety of hybrid account is Kent Bach's "loaded descriptivism".[23] On Bach's account part of the slur's meaning corresponds to what is denoted by the slur's neutral counterpart, and one additional descriptive component, that could be summarised along the lines of:

SLUR (Bach): x is a [group Y] and x is therefore worthy of contempt.

Thereby, the second part of slurs' semantic meaning is descriptive rather than expressive of a speaker's view of the extensional target(/s) of the slur.[24] Bach thus rejects the 'expressivism' part of hybrid expressivism, but retains the idea of slurs having a hybrid semantic meaning in his descriptivist account.

2.2 Problems for hybrid accounts of slurs

Having given an overview of how these accounts are constructed, I shall present some issues that these theories of slur meaning face due to being of the hybrid semantic variety. I have chosen to combine the criticism of them into one collective section rather than point out the same issues that each of them face individually.

To begin, one issue for hybrid accounts of slurs are that they heavily rely on neutral counterparts of slurs existing to explain how a slur's meaning is constructed. First, there is, as Geoffrey Nunberg points out, no such thing as truly neutral language

[19] Camp, p. 50.
[20] Ibid., p. 31, 30, 50.
[21] Ibid., p. 47-48.
[22] Ibid., p. 37, 56.
[23] Bach, p. 63.
[24] Ibid., p. 60.

to begin with, but rather only "default" language that is commonly accepted as demanding the least controversial commitment by the speaker when spoken. If there had been such a thing as fully neutral language, Nunberg argues, there would not exist any incentive to replace previous terms.[25] In his view, the difference between a slur and its so-called neutral counterpart is not that the former has certain negative connotations and the latter has none, but that the latter has *different*, less contested, connotations than the former.[26] There is nothing to say that the words we today consider to be neutral in comparison to slurs will not have their current status of 'neutrality' challenged in the future, like how the now archaic 'handicapped' has been replaced by 'disabled'.

Now, is presupposing the existence of neutral counterparts completely detrimental to hybrid expressivist accounts? Probably not. But it is theoretically cumbersome, as the theorising would have to include reservations about the idea of neutrality in language, and for how one kind of word's extension entails exactly the extension of another word without them being synonymous. It would to have to include some rather graceless and vague ideas of other words-that-single-out-the-same-set-of-individual-humans that could be avoided by not presupposing the existence of neutral counterparts at all. It would also need to be an explanation of neutrality that is not rooted in the actual use of words, since the reasoning behind a semantic account is the sentiment that a pragmatic account is not enough to explain how slurs function in language.

Additionally, the positing that the offensiveness of a slur derives from what sets it apart from a non-offensive co-referent can easily become circular. For if what sets offensiveness apart is its non-neutrality, and what sets neutrality apart is its non-offensiveness, then how can we define either without it resulting in circular reasoning in a *semantic* account? Granted, the demand for a neutral counterpart may not be essential to hybrid accounts, it may be that it is simply a convenient method of explanation that may be reduced or modified to not posit the existence of neutral counterparts at all. As of what I have been able to find, this is not currently the case however.

Furthermore, in the hybrid accounts' positing that the slur's extension set is identical to the set of individuals in the extension of the neutral counterpart, it seems

[25] Nunberg, p. 274–275, 273.
[26] Ibid., p. 273-274.

that part of the slur's extensionality is misrepresented: a slur seems to be able to be successfully applied to a wider set of individuals than the neutral counterpart. If we consider the following example (the phrase yet again borrowed from Camp):

6: "If they promote another bitch out of this damn job before me, I'm going to sue for discrimination."

Here, the speaker uses 'bitch' as extensionally equivalent to 'woman'. But utterances containing 'bitch' may also be directed towards individuals outside the set of women, such as in:

7: "Man up, don't be such a bitch."

Here being successfully directed at a male individual without causing anyone to be confused or believing that the speaker has misinterpreted the target's gender identity. Admittedly, one could argue that the slur is offensive in different ways, when applied to a female individual it might be offensive because it creates the idea that the target is somehow 'bad' or 'lesser' *because* she is a woman, and when applied to a male target the offensive effects arise from the man being so bad that he resembles a woman (or instantiates feminine 'lesser' qualities or the like). My point here is that the target of a slurring utterance need not necessarily be in the set contained in the slur's neutral counterpart in order to be successfully applied. There seems, therefore, to be a lesser 'demand' upon the extensionality of a slur compared to what semanticists call the word's neutral counterpart. Granted, 'woman' or 'girl' may be similarly used to 'bitch' in (7) to insult a non-woman, but I find it hard to see how a word like 'Jew' might as readily be successfully be applied to a non-Jewish person as its slur counterpart, 'kike', which might more conceivably be used to successfully insult a non-Jewish person.

Furthermore, most hybrid expressivist accounts run into trouble when trying to explain how a slur can be offensive when uttered by one speaker, but not at all when uttered by another, such as the example of 'nigga' when spoken by a member of certain African American communities mentioned in section 1.2.[27] This because most postulate that any and all uses of slurs are offensive in any given context, as the

[27] There are many within African American communities that do not agree that the term can be used in anything but a slurring way, as Luvell Anderson points out. Anderson, p. 8.

offensive effect-causing element is to be find in the words semantic meaning. Camp does not discuss this problem in her article, but I can imagine that this is an instance where her idea that either part of the slur's meaning could be primary in a given situation might be used to answer this criticism.[28] In her account, in the case of an in-group speaker of a slur, the primary meaning of the slur would then be the neutral-counterpart-equivalent one. This solution might save Camp's hybrid account from this issue, but it does not free other hybrid accounts like Jeshion's or Bach's, since they are adamant that the offensive effects of a slur are part of its semantic meaning at all times.

A similar problem also arises for the hybrid accounts of slur meaning in that slurs seem to be able to change meaning over time. This I slightly touched upon in the paragraph about neutrality, but it deserves its own explanation of how it poses a problem for the hybrid semantic accounts. Above I used the word 'nigga' to illustrate the problem of in-group versus out-group speaker, but we can also use it to illustrate the reappropriation of a slur word by the targeted group. In the process of being reclaimed, the word seems to get a new semantic meaning, if we are to suppose that the hybrid view of slurs is correct. There is no case of one part being primary or secondary, it seems that these reclaimed words completely loose any and all elements of antagonistic meaning; they, in this use, cease to be slurs. A clearer example is that of 'queer', formerly a slur but today more extensively used to denote a general LGBTQ+ identity, to the point where universities offer courses and degrees in Queer studies. The fact that slurs can simply cease to be slurs depending on use is damaging to hybrid semantic accounts of slur meaning especially since it seems that these words seem to be able to change semantic meaning depending on use. Normally, a word's truth-conditional meaning remains fairly stable over time; it is hard to see how words like 'arm' or 'Chinese' would be able to change meaning over the course of a hundred, or even a few hundred, years. But it seems that slurs especially are prone to come in or out of being slurs fairly quickly. Postulating an additional part of semantic meaning therefore seems to come at the cost of granting fairly rapid changes in semantic meaning as opposed to the more traditional truth-conditional view of semantic meaning. This is a problem that the other accounts of slurs' meaning do not share.

[28] Camp, p. 37, 56.

2.3 The linguistic competence approach

Yet another kind of semantic approach suggests that one way of interpreting a words meaning is that included in a word's meaning is what needs to be understood in order to competently use the word. There are two different approaches in this category that I want to address, one is Justina Diaz-Legaspe's idea that there are facts about words, such as register, that need to be known in order to fully understand them.[29] The other is Mark Richard's more vague idea that there simply are some facts about words that need to be known in order to use them competently.[30]

Starting with the more fleshed out theory, Diaz-Legaspe envisages slurs as a distinct word class, differentiated from other words by what she calls a "[+ derogatory]" register.[31] Register is in her view is a 'metadata' fact about the slur word that is not exactly part of its semantic content but not being aware of a word's register signals "linguistic incompetence".[32] It is interesting that she has chosen to use the term metadata, which both Geoffrey Nunberg and Geoffrey Pullum categorize as belonging to the realm of pragmatics.[33] That aside, Diaz-Legaspe's allows for slurs to be a more fluid category of words than the hybrid expressivist accounts above, as she bases her assignment of the [+ derogatory] register in social factors, which allows for a word to move in and out of the slur category depending on how it is used.[34]

Although Diaz-Legaspe distances herself from hybrid expressivism by saying that she in no way means that register affects truth-conditional values or have "the ability to convey an extra content above their truth-conditional content or to express emotions or attitudes", her account may be compared to other hybrid accounts like Bach's above.[35] This because she includes her notion of register in a category of meaning that is broader than strictly truth-conditional semantics, but that does not overlap with use, i.e. register should according to her not be considered a pragmatic feature of word meaning.[36] Thus she seems to be advocating for, if seen through the lens of a classic semantic-pragmatic division, some form of additional semantic

[29] Diaz-Legaspe, p. 13f.
[30] Mark Richard, "How do Slurs Mean?", *Bad Words. Philosophical Perspectives on Slurs*, ed. David Sosa, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2018, p. 159.
[31] Diaz-Legaspe p. 13, 15.
[32] Ibid., p. 13f.
[33] Nunberg, p. 265; Pullum, p. 170.
[34] Diaz-Legaspe p. 15.
[35] Ibid., p. 14, [footnote 22].
[36] Ibid., p. 13, [footnote 5].

component outside the truth-conditional one. Moreover, it is difficult to see how the fact of register could not affect truth-value in examples like:

8: "'Kike' is a derogatory word."

This statement would be true according to Diaz-Legaspe's theory since 'kike' would have the [+ derogatory] feature, while the statement

9: "'Jew' is a derogatory word."

Would still be false, since it lacks the [+ derogatory] register. Thus, it seems that register does affect truth-conditionality when it comes to separating slurs from more neutral words that denote the same set of individuals.

Similarly to Diaz-Legaspe, Mark Richard suggests a definition of meaning that apart from the truth-conditions of a word also has demands of "what a speaker has to be in cognitive contact with in order to qualify as competent" in order to fully grasp the word's meaning.[37] Thus Richard, in a sense, rejects the classical distinction between semantic and pragmatic meaning in favour of another, linguistic competence-based, concept of meaning. This includes that the word is most commonly used in a derogatory manner, that, as Richard puts it, "their central linguistic use […] is one that makes prejudice and disrespect manifest".[38] On this point Richard's account is comparable to Diaz-Legaspe's account, demanding that in order to comprehend a word, the speaker needs to be aware of certain facts about its use.

What I find most interesting in Richard's account however, is that he sketches a cognitively based process of understanding language in response to the in-/-out-group problem. He discusses a process of understanding language via unconscious processes based upon the facts known about the word's most common usage.[39] What he says is that initially, when a slur is uttered, the hearer is automatically and sub-consciously alerted to respond as if something offensive has been uttered, even though it may not be meant in an offensive way. The hearer may even realise this quite immediately, but the offensive effects of the slur are still triggered, as the offensive use of the slur is the most common one (in Richard's example, the hearer interprets an utterance in which a

[37] Richard, p. 159.
[38] Ibid., p. 158-159.
[39] Ibid., p. 166f.

Jewish person refers to themselves as a 'kike').[40] This thought of a cognitively based interpretation process of slurs is what I find to be one of the more interesting parts of Richard's account, and it is something I shall return to.

Another theoretic virtue that accounts like Diaz-Legaspe's and Richard's both share is that they avoid the trouble of presupposing the existence of neutral counterparts or additional parts of semantic meaning, which we saw above causes some trouble for the hybrid views. Thus the linguistic competence accounts do not fall victim to the in-group/out-group problem in the same way as the hybrid views do.

Even though I find the idea of linguistic competence to be central to the idea of meaning, I do wonder what exactly it is that merits that these facts that need to be known about a word cannot be included in pragmatic meaning. I find that neither Diaz-Legaspe nor Richard provides justification for why the notion of linguistic competence meaning cannot be included pragmatic meaning, as it seems to be based upon facts about how words are *used*. After all, the facts necessary for understanding language and being a competent speaker are on both accounts facts about how words are used or interpreted in a given situation. Thus, it seems to me that this idea of linguistic competence meaning is essentially a pragmatic notion. Perhaps what is needed in order to account for how we are to understand the meaning of slurs is not to inflate our notion of semantic meaning, but rather to reconsider what we commonly mean by pragmatic meaning?

2.4 General problems with the semantic accounts

In this section, I will briefly discuss what I believe to be the major problem facing all semantic theories of slurs' meaning, which is that they go against the classical philosophical distinction between semantics and pragmatics.

The main reason why I consider inflating the notion of semantic meaning in order to explain the meaning and function of slurs in language is the following: if we accept that there are aspects of slurs that merit expanding our idea of semantic meaning, what is there to say that the semantic meaning may not be expanded for other kinds of words as well? If we accept that there is no such thing as fully neutral language as I mentioned above, then we also have to accept that our so-called neutral terms that refer to groups of humans *also* contain these additional semantic contents.

[40] Richard, p. 166.

In this case, the 'neutral' counterparts must also contain the presuppositions or attitudes of the speaker or else some form of additional data denoting that the use of this word is at present time and societal context mostly uncontroversial. Thus, semantics will not have to be expanded for slurs only, but also for all other group-designating terms. And there is nothing to say that the inflation of semantic meaning may stop only at group-designating terms. In this way, semantic theories about slur meaning may potentially undermine the usefulness of distinguishing between semantic and pragmatic meaning in the first place.

This is not to say that the traditional division of truth-conditional semantics and 'everything else'-pragmatics is in some way a more accurate way of describing how a language functions. It may be, as Camp suggests, simply a methodologically useful tool for structuring our ideas of meaning in language.[41] I do not agree with Camp, however, that this merits expanding the traditional idea of semantics, since it would then undermine the distinction's original function of distinguishing between truth-conditional meaning as opposed to other forms of meaning in language.

3. Pragmatic accounts of slurs

Having examined the semantic accounts, we now move on to those who believe slurs are offensive solely on account of pragmatic factors. From what I have been able to find, these purely pragmatic accounts are fewer in number than the hybrid or other semantic accounts. Commonly they emphasise slurs' total semantic neutrality, which they argue is turned into a slur through how speakers use the word. An extremely simplified way of explaining it may be that there is not really such a thing as a slur on pragmatic accounts, only *slurring uses* of words. Here, I shall present two recent pragmatic accounts of slurs: Geoffrey Nunberg's "ventriloquistic" account as well as Ernie Lepore and Matthew Stone's idea of contextually interpreted "pejorative tone".[42] After this I shall present some general problems for both of these pragmatic explanations of the meaning of slurs.

[41] Camp, p. 48.
[42] Nunberg, p. 266ff; Ernie Lepore & Matthew Stone, "Pejorative Tone", *Bad Words. Philosophical Perspectives on Slurs*, ed. David Sosa, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2018, pp. 132-154.

3.1 Slurs as signalling social group membership of speaker

Geoffrey Nunberg offers a staunchly pragmatic account of slurs' offensiveness. Nunberg considers a slur to be a fundamentally neutral descriptive term that 'belongs' to the group that coined it. He makes the example of 'redskin' as belonging more to the white descendants of colonists rather than members of the group of Native Americans that the slur targets.[43] A slur is therefore, in Nunberg's eyes, a marker of the speaker's belonging to a certain social group rather than anything else. According to Nunberg, using a slur is a breach of the Gricean Maxim of Manner by using a word that belongs to another social group context than is what considered appropriate, and an act in which the speaker primarily aims to affiliate themselves with the group of people that in his words 'own' the slur, or as a way of showing in-group camaraderie by making fun of social groupings outside the own.[44] He uses the term ventriloquism or "ventriloquistic implicature" to denote this way of using a certain social group's words in the 'wrong' context. But, in his account, these are elements of metadata about slurs' meaning. And in his view, conversely to Diaz-Legaspe above, these metadata exclusively belong to pragmatic meaning.[45] In his account, there is nothing other than these pragmatic metadata that separates the meaning of a slur from the meaning of its so-called neutral counterpart.

Personally, I find the group-affiliating-by-the-speaker element that Nunberg so strongly highlights to be an important part of what slurs can be said to do. However, I would argue that his account falters in that he disregards uses of slurs that are explicitly meant to target other individuals and to shame, belittle, or otherwise hurt others that we already in section 1.2 established as one of the more important parts of slurs' function in language. He does attempt to acknowledge slurs' offensive and harmful effects by saying that the speaker does bear responsibility for the words they use, but it falls short against his insistence that a slur's primary function is in signalling the speaker's social group membership or as in-group banter about members of the out-group.[46]

[43] Nunberg, p. 289-290.
[44] Nunberg phrases it as follows: "the main reason why people coin slurs is to provide pleasure and gratification for their friends rather than to visit humiliation upon their targets". Nunberg, p. 256.
[45] Ibid., p. 265, 272.
[46] Ibid., p. 287; p. 256.

3.2 Slurs' offensive effects as examples of pejorative tone

Ernie Lepore and Matthew Stone argue that the only common denominator between the words populating the set of slurs is that they are "prohibited".[47] In the article, they argue that slurs are 'tabooed' words, offensive on account of some relevant authority deeming them to be so – there does not necessarily need to be a cause, on their view, for the word to be prohibited or tabooed in this way.[48] Lepore and Stone argue that the offensiveness of a slur is to be interpreted in each individual situation it occurs, on account of the situation meriting the interpretation of what they call pejorative tone. Thereby making their account of slurs' offensiveness a pragmatic one. The notion of tone dates back to Frege, who considers tone to be the difference between using "cur" and "dog" to refer to the same animal. In Frege's example, these words denote the same object or concept; they only do so in different ways.[49] Lepore and Stone argue that slurs operate in a similar way, that words like 'Jew' and 'kike' are simply different *sinn* for the same *bedeutung*: they evoke "different associations" that on their view "need *not* be due to differences in meaning".[50] Instead, they argue that there is something more indefinable, like a collection of vague associations that are outside Lepore and Stone's definition of meaning.[5152] On their account, the difference between 'Jew' and 'kike' is akin to that of "blossom" and "bloom" – that these words are synonyms evoking different vague connotations but that they are, ultimately, synonyms.[53] They also insist on the weight of the individual "interpretative reasoning" in deeming an utterance to instantiate a case of the pejorative tone they describe, that is, they deem that it is in each individual tokening of a slur up to the recipient or person taking offense to decide whether or not the utterance has a pejorative tone.[54] This I also find disregards the idea brought up by the linguistic competence approach, and by Nunberg to an extent in insisting the speaker has moral responsibility of word choice, that the offensiveness of a slur is a fact about the word that a competent

[47] Lepore & Stone, p. 134f.
[48] Ibid., p. 137.
[49] Ibid., p. 133.
[50] Ibid., p. 133.
[51] Ibid., p. 138.
[52] In the article, Lepore and Stone do not explicitly refer to their idea of tone as a pragmatic notion. Nevertheless, I take that what they are aiming to describe when they simply say *meaning* is the truth-conditional semantic meaning of a word, whereas I interpret *tone*, due to its dependence upon contextual factors, to be an element of pragmatic meaning.
[53] Lepore & Stone, p.140. Additionally, Lepore and Stone do not actually use or make mention of any actual slur words in their examples, preferring instead to use "blossom" and "bloom" as their examples of synonyms of tonal difference throughout.
[54] Ibid., p. 138.

speaker should know *prior* to making competent use of it.[55] By leaving the interpretation of offensive effects to the speaker, Lepore and Stone thus disregard that slurs are commonly known among speakers to cause offensive effects, and they also thereby in a way frees the speaker of a slur from responsibility for causing these effects.

What I find to be lacking in Lepore and Stone's account is similar to what I find to be lacking in Nunberg's account: they seem to be disregarding how big of a part of a slur's function in language their offensive effects seem to be. The offensive effects are evidently, as we've seen above, inescapable parts of slur meaning to the degree that many believe that it merits including the offensiveness in a slur's semantic meaning. They equate the offense an individual takes at being called a slur is akin to the offense an individual takes at being called a nickname that they dislike.[56] This I find to be ignoring the idea that a slur is different from a personal insult in that they are offensive, derogative, and insulting to the individual it is directed at and the whole group of individuals that it denotes *simultaneously*.

3.3 General problems with the pragmatic point of view

Having presented some issues that the pragmatic accounts above face individually, in this section, I shall present some of the more general problems they face. To begin, one idea that lies at the heart of many of the arguments we have seen from the opposing semantic point of view is the idea of non-synonymy between slurs and their neutral counterparts. To illustrate this I will again use examples borrowed from Camp, one of which I have referenced to above as well:

3: "Institutions that treat Chinese as chinks are racist"

or

10: "Am I racist if I believe that Chinese people are chinks?"

In these examples, we can see that there is in fact, as Camp argues, a difference between the slur and the so-called neutral counterpart, since if we were to accept them

[55] Nunberg, p. 287.
[56] Lepore & Stone, p. 137.

as synonyms, the above utterances would not make any sense, as evidenced by the following phrases:

3R: "Institutions that treat Chinese as Chinese are racist"[57]

10R: "Am I racist if I believe that Chinese people are Chinese?"

I can see a possible way out of this for Nunberg by appealing to his idea that slurs are primarily a way for the speaker to associate themselves with certain slur-using social groups. However, as I have already argued above, I find this idea to be unable to capture the ability of slurs to cause offensive effects even in mention, and thus this would still be a weak defence. Additionally, as Lepore and Stone consider slurs and their so-called neutral counterparts to be synonymous, I fail to see how they would make sense of the apparent sense that (3) and (10) make compared to (3R) and (10R).

It seems to me as if semantic accounts are too inflationary to be theoretically valuable ways of approaching the meaning of slurs, these pragmatic accounts are too deflationary in that they seem to disregard too much of the things that the utterance of slurs cause, namely their extensive offensive, insulting, and derogative effects.

4. Discussion

At this point, I have presented and reviewed both semantic and pragmatic accounts of the meaning of slurs, and found virtues and faults on both sides of the divide. In this section I aim to reiterate these in order to present my idea that a more effective way of theorising about the meaning of slurs would be in a pragmatic account of slurs where pragmatic elements of meaning and interpretation are equally or even more highly valued than semantic meaning.

What I find virtuous about the sematic accounts I have mentioned in general is that they take seriously that slurs carry with them a harmful element, and that they in more situations than not are highly insulting, contemptuous, derogatory, and offensive. As we have seen, they respect that there seems to be a significant distinction between utterances of "Jew" and "kike" that they believe is done disrespect to by reducing

[57] Camp, p. 33, 43. Phrases (3), (10), and (3R) taken directly from Camp, (10R) modified according to Camp's example in (3R).

slurs' meaning to a mere extensional synonym of a neutral counterpart, which is exactly what the pragmatic accounts reviewed argue. As we have also seen, it is easy to see how one would reject "kike" as a synonym to "Jew" on account of its offensive and derogatory element. They also seem to respect a natural way of reasoning about etymology: since these words were coined and originally used by groups of people that were actively oppressive and/or hateful toward the target group, this must be a part of its meaning.[58] A slur is then consequently offensive and insulting partly because it, in different ways according to the different semantic accounts presented above, represents the point of view of its original users. However, we also saw that there are words which meanings simply cannot be explained by a semantic account because of this static view of slurs' meaning, such as 'queer'.

Furthermore, I would again argue that if we are to retain the methodological benefits of the semantic-pragmatic distinction that warranted its creation, it is not theoretically sound to inflate the notion of semantic meaning to include more than semantic meaning.

Yet the pragmatic theories of slur meaning that I have presented do not seem to be able to account adequately for slurs' offensive effects. So whereas the semantic accounts are theoretically cumbersome, the pragmatic accounts seem to be unable to explain why slurs are able to cause the offensive effects they do to the point where it is difficult to see how these accounts merit classifying slurs as a category of words separate from other group-designating terms.

What I suggest is therefore a re-evaluation of semantic versus pragmatic meaning. I believe that the offensive effects that slurs cause are very much part of their primary function in language, and that, much like those arguing for a linguistic competence approach propose, this is a fact about slurs that any competent speaker needs to have knowledge of in order to truly understand the word. But I also believe that this does not merit inflating our idea of semantic meaning. I suggest that we instead view some pragmatic facts like these about how slurs are commonly used to be essential to the understanding of their meaning.

In this view, many of the problems faced by the semantic accounts other than theoretic inelegance could possibly be be avoided as well. The in-group/out-group problem would then for example be trivial, as a slur uttered by an in-group speaker

[58] See for example Diaz-Legaspe, p. 15f.

would then in most contexts not be interpreted as hostile, and the semantic meaning of the word would not have to be changed because of the speaker belonging to the group traditionally targeted by hostile uses of the slur.

Overall, the idea of slurs' pragmatic meaning is close to that suggested by the proponents of the linguistic competence approach, only that what they claim to be non-pragmatic aspects of slur meaning are in fact pragmatic, and that this does not make them less primary to the meaning of a slur. It would seem rather, that in the case of slurs, it is then their pragmatic meaning that is most often primary as opposed to their semantic meaning.

In additional support to this I wish to return also to Richard's idea of an immediate interpretative process taking place in the hearer at the utterance of a slur. As mentioned in the section on the linguistic competence approach, he is of the opinion that the immediateness of this interpretive process warrants an expansion of semantic meaning, rather than calling it a pragmatic process. However, I see no reason as to why we could not see this interpretative process as pragmatic, since it is ultimately based upon knowledge of previous uses of the word.

There is not enough space to fully develop an argument supporting a re-evaluation of pragmatics as opposed to semantics, and I do not aim to imply that I do anything of the sort. What I wish to suggest at most in this essay is that perhaps we can gather, from investigating the semantic-pragmatic distinction as it figures in recent debate about the meaning of slurs, is that there may be cause to further investigate a re-evaluation of pragmatic meaning in language to be more primary than semantic meaning. This because there does seem to be many aspects of slur meaning that appear to be inescapably part of how we interpret and react to utterances of slurs that cannot be satisfactorily explained by either a semantic or a traditional pragmatic account.

5. Conclusion

After a review of some recent accounts of slurs' place in language and meaning, I have come to conclude that both sides are lacking in some aspects. We have seen that semantic accounts generally inflate the notion of semantic meaning without gaining a proportional advantage, but also that extant pragmatic accounts do not seem to want to take slurs' offensive effects to be part of their meaning except for in very local contexts. I have therefore proposed a sort of middle ground between the two sides of the argument I have reviewed: that we see slurs' offensive effects as belonging to pragmatics, but not in such a way that we are undervaluing these effects. On the contrary, when it comes to slurs, I have suggested that it might be that elements of their pragmatic meaning is the one that matters most in most situations when it comes to slurs, as many take slurs' offensive effects to be their raison d'être.

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