

Classes #27-28 - Slurs
Jeshion, "Slurs and Stereotypes"
Camp, "Slurring Perspectives"

Be advised: These notes contains offensive language.

I. Slurs, Stereotypes, Semantics, Pragmatics

Our last topic for the term is slurs and stereotype terms.

Such terms are sometimes called expressives.

The category of expressives is wider, including epithets, diminutives, slurs, stereotypes, and interjections. We have recently examined briefly the difference between pragmatics and semantics in the philosophy of language.

Semantics is the study of the content of language.

In semantics we study the literal meanings of words and sentences and utterances.

Pragmatics is the study of what we communicate with language beyond literal meaning.

Grice's work on pragmatics, especially, paved the way for a more-robust and unambiguous study of semantics.

To see that, consider this example (which I stole from Barbara Partee).

- M1 Mary got married and had a baby.
- M2 Mary had a baby and got married.
- M3 Mary had a baby and got married, but not in that order.

We often treat 'and' as having no temporal component, in logic for example.

But the difference between M1 and M2 shows that there's a temporal component to our understanding of the 'and'.

We can say that there are different meanings of 'and': one with a temporal component and one without it. But, following Grice, we can instead say that there is one meaning of 'and', but that its use can carry a conversational implicature.

Remember, Grice had claimed that the difference between semantics and pragmatics is not the same as the difference between formal and informal methods.

Philosophers like Strawson seemed to think that there was one distinction where there is actually two: between formal and informal approaches to language and between semantics and pragmatics.

We can understand variations in what we communicate with language not as ambiguity of natural language or a deficiency in the logical analysis of language, but as arising from other aspects of communication, in particular conversational implicature.

One of the questions facing the analysis of expressives is whether they have semantic content or whether they are to be treated as an aspect of pragmatics.

This is no mere philological dispute; it's not about an arbitrary classification.

The question, at its root, is whether expressives, and in particular slurs and stereotypes, carry content or whether they might best be classified as a kind of speech act.

One difference between semantics and pragmatics concerns a phenomenon we can call cancelling.

Notice that in M3, above, we can cancel the implication of the order of the birth and the marriage.

That's because it's a pragmatic matter, not a semantic matter.

We can not cancel literal meaning.

But we can cancel implicature.

Indeed, Grice's article was centrally focused on how we exploit conversational maxims in part by cancelling.

To illustrate the difference between a semantic and pragmatic analysis of slurs, consider C and K.

C	Chang is a Chink.
K	Keren is a Kike.

If we provide a semantic analysis of C and K, then we are committed to seeing them as having truth value.

Given the offensiveness of the terms used, we are likely to want to call them false.

But to call C and K false seems to commit us to claiming that the offensive terms have some sort of content, when we might prefer to take them as having no content.

The semantic analysis leads to some philosophical puzzles.

In particular, if we're calling them false, we might want to call their negations true, and that seems infelicitous.

An alternative analysis is to take expressives as having only pragmatic status.

Remember, speech acts (Austin said this about performative utterances) don't have truth conditions, but felicity conditions.

On a pragmatic analysis, C and K are not false, but truth-valueless.

Uttering those sentences is a speech act which does not convey content.

Jeshion's paper surveys the difference between the two analyses, largely by way of examining a paper by Chris Hom and Robert May on the topic.

We won't discuss the Hom and May paper in any detail, but you can find it on the course website.

Hom provides a semantic analysis which Jeshion calls an SSS: a stereotype semantics of slurs.

But before we get to the comparison between the semantic and pragmatic analyses, let's take a step back to frame the problem in more detail.

II. Kaplan, Ouch, and Oops.

The newly classic work which grounds the pragmatic analysis of slurs and stereotypes is by the wonderful UCLA philosopher David Kaplan.

Kaplan made his name partly by trying to apply formal logic to the insights of the work of the anti-formalists like Strawson.

The important work here is his 1999 Howison lecture at UC Berkeley: [The Meaning of "Ouch" and "Oops"](#).

You have had such good training that I think you could enjoy that talk.

He talks about the work you have been reading from Frege, Russell, Wittgenstein, Strawson, and Quine.

Kaplan studied with Carnap who studied with Frege, so he's kind of a big deal for that reason alone.

He is an engaging speaker, and a nice guy, so it could be fun.

Just as Kaplan tried to apply formal methods to the work of anti-formalists, he tries to apply systematic, formalizable methods to a pragmatic analysis of terms, like slurs, which we don't ordinarily think of as

carrying semantic content.

In other words, he's taking a semanticist's approach to pragmatics.

We get from Kaplan what we can call the Classic Motivating Examples for expressivist terms, generally, including slurs and stereotypes.

The examples concern the two inferences DK1 and DK2.

DK1 That damned Kaplan got the job.
So, Kaplan got the job.

DK2 Kaplan got the job.
So, that damned Kaplan got the job (from Kaplan 1999).

DK1 is valid, but DK2 is not.

So there is something more in 'that damned Kaplan' than in 'Kaplan'.

The questions Kaplan raises concern the nature of the something more.

In particular, we need to know whether the something more is content (thought) or feeling.

Kaplan's view is that there is something logical about the content of expressives.

Given that they have logical content, he says that we should treat them semantically, rather than pragmatically.

'Ouch' and 'I am in pain' each carry the same semantic information, though they carry that information differently.

A similar analysis might hold for slurs and what we might call their neutral counterparts (e.g. 'kike' and 'Jew' or 'spic' or 'Latino').

They (arguably) carry the same information.

They have logical and semantic content.

But they function differently.

III. A Third Option

One might think that there is a third option for understanding slurs and stereotypes, beyond thought (semantics) or feeling (pragmatics).

One might think that C and K include neither thought nor feeling, above the ascriptions of group membership which they share with their neutral counterparts, but just a pure violation of taboo.

This is the view of [Luvell Anderson and Ernie Lepore](#).

[S]lurs are prohibited words not on account of any content they get across, but rather because of relevant edicts surrounding their prohibition (Anderson and Lepore 26).

The taboo hypothesis seems inadequate for three instructive reasons.

First, it seems like the relevant terms have some content.

We can use them correctly or not.

They carry some information.

For example, 'that damned Kaplan' can only be used, literally, by someone who disdains Kaplan.

Second, we need an explanation for why such terms are taboo.

The status of a term as taboo is not arbitrary.

The reasons why a term is taboo may be the informational content of the term.

Third, there are appropriate and inappropriate uses of some such terms, like 'fuck' or 'ouch' or even 'kike' (which would be inappropriately applied to a non-Jew).

Again, those criteria seem to be part of the informational content of the term.

We might deal with that content in different ways.

Again, it might be descriptive content, to be analyzed semantically, or it might be emotive content, to be analyzed pragmatically.

So, we have two options to explore: descriptive content and emotive (or expressive) content.

Jeshion's paper is mainly an overview of the debate, though she defends the expressivist view.

I'll follow her in outlining the arguments for the two sides.

On Thursday, we will look at a further and creative option, by Liz Camp, which combines aspects of both of these simpler views.

Among the questions we can use to discriminate between the semantic (descriptive content) and pragmatic (expressive) options are:

Are C and K false or truth-valueless?

What does their denial effect?

Are there kikes and niggers and chinks (and such)?

IV. The Descriptive-Content Option

The most salient content option is that the something more in a slur than in a neutral counterpart is an allusion to stereotypes.

Slurs are offensive because they ascribe negative, derogatory properties associated with a stereotype to an individual.

There are various arguments for the descriptive content option.

First, mainly against the Anderson and Lepore view, slurs are more pernicious than 'damned Kaplan' or, better, 'fucking Kaplan', in which the violation of taboo is clearer.

In 'fucking Kaplan', taboo is violated, but nothing in particular is communicated about Kaplan except perhaps disdain.

But with slurs, we communicate more than just a violation of taboo.

There seems to be content encoded in the slur.

Indeed, slurs bring out stereotypes effortlessly.

People with competence in a language can easily identify a variety of characteristics associated with any slur.

Kikes are cheap, niggers are shifty, spics are lazy, wops are greasy, and micks are drunks.

The ease with which we can bring to mind these characteristics seems to entail that they are part of the meanings of the slurs.

Moreover, users of slurs seem to get things wrong about a group.
Not all Jews are cheap; not all African-Americans are shift; not all Latinos are lazy, etc.
One can only get something wrong if one is saying something truth-valuable.
If the content of a slur was not semantic, then it would be difficult to account for the errors.

We (non-bigots) generally think that the bigot gets things wrong about members of a group when s/he uses a slur in making a claim in that the stereotype ordinarily associated with a term does not hold universally of a group.

Ascribing a universal, misleading stereotype is not the only way that we can make errors with slurs. We can mis-use them by ascribing the wrong characteristics to a member of a group. Imagine calling a Jew a kike because he is lazy and sexually predatory, calling a Latino a spic because she is cheap, or calling a Swede a nigger. The bigot in such instances gets the content of the slur wrong. Again, this error seems explicable only if the slur carries semantic content.

Further, the semantic analysis of slurs can explain derogatory variation. It seems worse to call someone a nigger than to call someone a retard or a honky. Again, the difference seems easily explicable by supposing that those terms encode information with semantic structure.

Jeshion also points out that some uses of slurs seem only explicable in terms of descriptive content. She appeals to Chris Rock's "(in)famous": "I love black people but I hate Niggers." The distinction seems best explained by reference to particular characteristics of the stereotype.

Lastly, Liz Camp provides the following example.

I bet you they hire a nigger and a dyke before they even consider a white guy (334).

All non-bigots will refuse to take the bet on those terms.
But we all know what the conditions for the bet's success are.
Those conditions again seem easily understood as content encoded in the slurs.

V. Problems with the Descriptive-Content Option

The descriptive-content option says that when someone uses a slur, s/he ascribes the stereotype encoded in the slur to a member of a group.
There are some slurs for which the stereotype view is plausible.
Jeshion mentioned 'Jewish American Princess' and 'Uncle Tom'.
Those slurs seem to encode specific properties.

But the descriptive-content account seems unable to explain why NC and NK seem just as offensive as C and K, even though the attribution of the stereotype content is denied.

NC Chang is not a Chink.
NK Keren is not a Kike.

Even a denial of the attribution of the slur is offensive speech.
Compare PO1 and PO2.

- PO1 If David is intelligent, then so is Judith.
PO2 If Obama is a nigger, then so is his wife.

The speaker of PO1 can deny ascribing any content.
PO1 ascribes descriptive content only conditionally.
The user of PO1 is not committed to the intelligence of David or Judith.
The speaker of PO2, in contrast, can not deny ascribing content.
It seems that there is more than descriptive content in the slur.

This phenomenon is called projection: the offensiveness of the term in PO2 projects out of the statement, no matter the content of the assertion, even if we deny the assertion.
Jeshion illustrates projection with these two claims.

- Y Yao is a Chink.
NY Yao is not a Chink.

The speaker of Y is committed to a bigoted assertion.
The speaker of NY is denying that the associated stereotype holds.
Still, the speaker of NY seems complicit and to communicate something bigoted.
The descriptive-content option seems insufficient to explain projection.

Hom explains the offensiveness of Y and NY differently.
For Y, the offensiveness is encoded semantically into the slur.
For NY, the offensiveness can't be explained that way.
So, Hom appeals to pragmatics.
Jeshion is not impressed.

This move does provide an explanation of [NY]'s offensiveness, but is not without problems.
The most pressing is that it fails to explain the offensiveness of [NY] along the same lines as it does that of [Y], which is counterintuitive, as they seem equally offensive and for the same reason.... Furthermore, if the offensiveness in [NY] is accounted for entirely as a conversational implicature, it ought to be cancelable, yet it is not (Jeshion 317).

Camp raises some questions about the robustness of projection.

Although I agree that this 'wide-scope' projective behavior is typical, I don't think the data are as clearcut as recent discussants have maintained (Camp 331).

Still, the phenomenon seems to be a major problem for the semantic (i.e. descriptive content) view.
It seems as if either the content of the slur is not semantic or the semantic content is weird and the analysis of sentences using slurs is non-standard.

While projection is a central problem with the semantic view, there are further problems as well.
For instance, while we can bring some attributes of some slurs to mind easily, others elude us.
It's difficult to specify the content of any stereotype precisely, or even just beyond a thin

characterization.

Moreover, it's implausible to ascribe the content to all users of the slur.

The defender of the descriptive-content view, like Hom, argues in response for a kind of semantic externalism about the content.

Recall Putnam's claim about the division of linguistic labor.

Applied to the case of slurs, we can call it the division of contemptuous linguistic labor!

Just as one can competently use "elm" without being able to distinguish an elm from a beech, one can competently use "Chink" without knowing the complex socially constructed property expressed with a use of that term (Jeshion 316).

The particular user of the slur need not know or think about all of the content of the slur.

That's the role of social institutions of bigotry.

Still, the offensiveness of slurs seems to go beyond the attribution of negative stereotypes, whether or not particular users know of them.

Some slurs lack clear offensive stereotypes.

'Midget' is clearly a slur, but there are no negative properties associated with it.

Similarly for 'goyim' and 'gaijin'.

They are derogatory, but without any particular content.

Some terms are highly offensive in some communities and less so in others.

The term 'spastic' isn't particularly offensive in the US, but is so in the UK.

Such variation seems difficult to explain if the offensiveness is part of the meaning of the term.

And some content is laudatory though slurs are always offensive.

For example, a stereotype often associated with Chinese involves their being good at math.

There's nothing wrong or essentially derogatory about being good at math or respecting one's elders.

Whatever content we might associate with a slur may even be irrelevant in some uses.

Even their etiology seems to undermine the descriptive-content view.

People who use slurs often do not appeal to reasons which we can include as part of the meaning of the slur.

Slurs seem to originate in something more expressive, like pure disdain.

They gather content later.

If the descriptive content view fails, a pragmatic analysis might be better.

That's sometimes called expressivism, and it is the direction toward which Jeshion gestures.

VI. The Expressivist Option

Kaplan's view is kind of a pragmatic one, but one which attributes logical relations within the pragmatic content.

We can call it expressivism: a slur is an expression of the speaker's attitude.

Some terms clearly express an attitude: boo, hurrah.

They are not equivalent to related sentences which describe their expressions.

"Ouch" does not mean "I am in pain," as we saw in Austin's distinction between speech acts and the assertions related to them.

(Kaplan points out in his talk that Wittgenstein says that “I am in pain” means “Ouch,” but let’s put that aside.)

We can see that terms like ‘ouch’ and ‘boo’ are expressive and not semantic, since we often boo the better team.

Paradigms for expressivism include terms like fucker and asshole.

These express an attitude without ascribing any particular content.

As Camp writes, the expressivist parses the ascription of a slur, like C or K, as appending an expression of disdain (or even an obscene gesture) to an ascription of group membership.

So ‘Isaiah is a Kike’ is supposed to be understood as I.

I Isaiah is Jewish. And by the way: boo to Jews! (Camp 332).

Jeshion lightly argues for expressivism by showing that the bigot can get the same results without even using a slur, even by using its neutral counterpart.

She contrasts Y with YC and YF.

YC Yao is Chinese [said with a contemptuous sneer].

YF Yao is a fucking Chinese.

Other arguments for expressivism are essentially the ones against the semantic content view.

On the descriptive-content horn, slurs express something true or false.

But C and K and the like can be neither true nor false.

If they were false, then their negations would be true.

But NC and NK are not true, either.

Here, the expressivist claims that uses of slurs are like failures of presupposition.

Strawson argues that ‘the king of France is bald’ fails to express a proposition.

Similarly, we can claim that uses of slurs are neither true nor false.

One might then assimilate them with speech acts which are not truth-valuable.

The expressivist can more-easily account for projection.

Both affirmations and denials of slurs can express the same contempt.

If expressing a feeling is a fundamentally different kind of act than referring or predicating, perhaps we should predict that it would not get caught up in the machinery of truth-conditional composition (Camp 332)

Some slurs have the same content but different force.

There appears to be something to the slur beyond the content.

And calling a Swede nigger still manages to piss off the Swede.

The content is irrelevant in this case.

Still, there are problems for expressivism.

Everything that motivates the semantic content view is a problem.

The expressivist assimilates slurs with expletives, as Kaplan does.

But they seem to have different properties.

Camp provides an additional problem.
Consider the racist's claim:

I have nothing but admiration for spics. I mean, they sure do look out for each other, and they know how to work hard and have a good time. You know, some of my best friends are spics (Camp 333).

On expressivism, this kind of claim should be incoherent.
If the slur is an expression of disdain, we can't explain uses of the slur which don't include disdain.
Camp argues that the expressivist model is insufficient.

“[T]he bigot's error is deep; but it is in part factual: if g [the property that determines the slur's extension] really were explanatorily efficacious in the way the perspective presents it as being, then the associated perspective could be an accurate way of thinking about Gs; and if g really did produce a range of properties that deserved to be condemned, then the corresponding emotions could be warranted” (338).

Her claim of course is not that some stereotypes are right, though it is possible that they could be.
The point is that they are the kinds of things one gets right or wrong; they have semantic and not just emotive content.

VII. The Axis

We have explored three separate options for understanding slurs and stereotypes: the pure taboo view, the descriptive-content view, and the expressivist view.

The latter two have a lot going for them.

On the descriptive content view, uses of slurs are understood semantically, most plausibly as attributing a stereotype.

On the expressivist view, uses of slurs are understood pragmatically, not as truth-functional, but as speech acts of derogation.

We saw above that there are some questions which help us discriminate between these two views.
The answers to those questions are intuitive.

Intuitive answers to broad questions won't settle the matter.

We have to think about broader questions about semantic and pragmatic theories.

But anyway they help identify the commitments of either analysis.

The axis questions were:

1. Are C and K false or truth-valueless?
2. What does their denial effect?
3. Are there kikes and niggers and chinks?

If we think that C and K and the like are false, then we are semanticists.

If we think that they are truth-valueless, then we favor a pragmatic analysis.

Considerations of their denials help us determine whether we think they are false (since the denial of a false sentence is, assuming bivalence, a true one).

And if we think that there are people for whom the slur is apt (even if we think that the slur is offensively

ascribed to them), it seems as if we have to choose a semantic analysis.

There's another way to discriminate between the two options, having to do with cancelling.

Remember, we can not cancel semantic content, but we can cancel pragmatic content, as in M1, M2, and M3.

So, if uses of slurs are cancelable, then they deserve a pragmatic treatment.

But if they are not cancelable, then they deserve a semantic treatment.

Unfortunately, the data aren't categorical.

Camp and Jeshion both point out that some uses can be cancelled, especially any particular content alleged to be part of the stereotype associated with a slur.

Camp focuses on the cancelability of any particular attitude.

But Jeshion hedges on the conclusion for semantic stereotype-attribution analyses (which she calls SSSs).

[I]f cancelability is an adequate test for content not being semantically encoded and if the argument just adduced against the alleged uncanceledability of stereotypes is sound, then it constitutes a positive argument as to why any SSS is incorrect (Jeshion 322)

One problem with the cancelability test is that it seems in tension with projection.

On the one hand, users of a slur can deny that they intend to ascribe any particular, denigrating characteristic to an individual or group.

On the other, any uses of the slur seem to commit both the listener and the audience to a derogating perspective.

VIII. Camp's Neat Idea

Camp attempts to find a middle ground between the semantic and the expressivist by pursuing a two-dimensional analysis of slurs, one which captures some of the features of both.

Her first attempt, which we can call Middle Ground #1 (MG1), is that slurs express an emotive property (contempt) for members of a group picked out by the slur.

The content picks out the group.

The strong negative affect is written into the conventional meaning.

Camp thinks of the ascribed property as distancing and derogating rather than contempt or denigration.

Although it is undeniable, and important, that slurs denigrate, I think an associated feeling of contempt is less important and explanatory than is usually assumed. Rather, I think the association with contempt largely falls out of a more basic one: that the perspective is distancing in the sense that the speaker signals that he is not 'of' or aligned with Gs; and more specifically, that it is derogating in the sense that the speaker signals that Gs are not worthy of respect. Derogation and contempt are closely allied, to be sure; but it seems that one can withhold respect without evincing contempt (338).

Still, there are problems with MG1.

First, it is overly specific and broad.

Different slurs have different degrees of the property.

Users of a slur often even deny contempt.

They'll appeal to "It's just a joke" or "That's the way they think of themselves" or even "Some of them are my best friends."

The analysis of slurs in terms of any particular attitude or content is bound to fail.

Thus, Camp proposes her perspectivalist view.

For Camp, the use of a slur indicates the user's allegiance to a perspective, though one which can vary with the slur and the society.

Perspectives have both what we have been calling descriptive content, a semantic aspect, and what we have been calling expressive content, a pragmatic (or anyway truth-valueless) aspect.

It is connected to both thought and feeling.

But a perspective does not include any particular content and it is not a particular expression of feeling.

A perspective is representational, insofar as it provides a lens for interpreting and explaining truth-conditional contents, but it need not involve a commitment to any specific content.

Likewise, a perspective typically motivates certain feelings as appropriate to feel toward its subject, but it is not itself a feeling (Camp 335).

Users of a slur and audiences indicate their complicity in a perspective.

That complicity has two dimension.

Cognitive complicity is related to the content of the slur.

Social complicity is related to the institutions which support the targeting of groups.

[A] perspectival treatment of slurs nicely balances two apparently conflicting facts: that slurs produce substantive, insidious, and systematically predictable rhetorical effects, and that those effects are typically amorphous, open-ended, and indeterminate (Camp 344)

Camp's proposal gets at the virtues of both the semantic and pragmatic analyses.

Still, it involves commitment to a new semantic category, perspectives.

Let's look a bit more closely at these.

IX. Perspectives

Perspectives are, like stereotypes or any semantic phenomenon, representational.

They aren't any particular content, but a, "lens for interpreting and explaining truth-functional contents" (Camp 335).

They are deeper and broader than propositional attitudes, tools for thoughts, not thoughts themselves.

Still, she claims that sentences 11 and 12 show that we have to think of perspectives as semantic.

(11) They gave the job I applied for to a spic.

(12) They gave the job I applied for to a Hispanic (Camp 340).

While 12 merely implies contempt, 11 really gets it into the meaning of the sentence.

Similarly, perspectives motivate feelings but are not themselves feelings.

Perspectives allow us to prime or frame emotional responses.

But users of slurs don't always have emotions when using slurs and bigots can cancel their commitments to any particular attitude.

Camp says that perspectives involve dispositions: to remember certain features (prominence, salience), and to treat some features as more central.

She also claims that perspectives explain projection.

Uses of slurs are not referring or predicating, so the projection isn't contrary to standard semantic phenomenon like referring or asserting.

Camp's view is radical, especially in claiming that perspectives are part of a slur's meaning.

The study of language is syntax, semantics, pragmatics.

Camp's view blurs lines between pragmatics into semantics.

The claim that a perspective is part of a meaning seems like a category error.

Camp thinks of perspectives as a broader category.

Other perspectival expressions include formal and informal terms of address, as *vous* and *tu*; slang which indicates membership in a group; and terms like 'cowardly'

Slurs are akin to other expressions part of whose conventional function is not merely to refer or predicate, but to signal the speaker's social, psychological, and/or emotional relation to that semantic value (Camp 335).

The claim that there is a semantic act (as opposed to a pragmatic one or merely behavioral one) called signaling (as opposed to saying, implying, referring) seems perhaps to violate principles of parsimony. Still, given the inadequacy of simpler explanations, perhaps our ordinary categories need expansion.