

Classes #27-28 - Slurs
Hom, "The Semantics of Racial Epithets"
Anderson and Lepore, "What Did You Call Me? Slurs as Prohibited Words"

Be advised: These notes contains some fucking offensive language.

I. Slurs, Stereotypes, Semantics, Pragmatics

Our last topic for the term is slurs and epithets, especially racial epithets.

A slur is a derogatory term for a member of a group, one which picks out an individual for disdain or scorn just for being a member of some group.

Slurs and epithets are sometimes called expressives.

The category of expressives is wider than that of slurs, including interjections, diminutives, and other kinds of stereotype terms.

One of the big questions facing the analysis of slurring terms is whether their appropriate analysis is semantic or pragmatic, or maybe something else.

Hom presents a semantic analysis, which he calls combinatorial externalism.

Anderson and Lepore present an analysis, which they call prohibitionism, which may be classified as pragmatic, but maybe something else entirely.

Semantics is the study of the content of language, 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 the difference between semantics and pragmatics, consider this example 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 the meaning of 'and' as having no temporal component, in logic for example.

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

We could analyse 'and' by saying that there are two different meanings of the word: one with a temporal component and one without it.

That would make the semantics of the term complicated.

Following Grice, we instead say that there is one meaning of 'and', but that its use can carry a conversational implicature.

In M1 and M2, we implicate a temporal order of the two events.

In M3, we cancel that implication.

Remember that Grice shows 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 is one distinction where there is actually two:

Formal vs. informal approaches to language, and
Semantics vs. 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, we can see some variation in our communication at the level of conversational implicature, or in pragmatics more generally.

The central question for our study of the work of Horn and Anderson and Lepore, between semantic and pragmatic analyses of slurs, may be seen as a corollary of that question for the more general category of expressives.

Do expressives have semantic content or are they best treated as an aspect of pragmatics?

This is no mere philological question.

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.

Are racists, for example, saying something when they use racial slurs?

Are they merely expressing attitudes or violating prohibitions?

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 cancel implicature, as we do in M3.

We can not felicitously cancel literal meaning.

You can't meaningfully and literally say, "Brett is a bachelor, but I don't mean that he's unmarried."

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.

On most semantic analyses, C and K have truth values.

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

But, *prima facie*, calling C and K false seems to commit us to the awkward conclusion that the offensive terms have some sort of content, that there is some set of properties which is properly called being a Chink and some set which is properly called being a Kike.

If we don't think that 'chink' or 'kike' or other such terms actually pick out anything in the world, we might better take them as having no content.

Then, utterances of C and K would literally be neither true nor false.

Recall Strawson's claim that 'the king of France is bald' is neither true nor false due to a false presupposition.

We could, perhaps, say the same thing about C and K

On such an analysis, the offensiveness of C and K is not semantic, but pragmatic, about how the terms are used, but not about what they mean.

Remember Austin's claim that performative utterances (and perhaps, more generally, speech acts other

than assertion) lack truth conditions; they have felicity conditions instead.
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.

Before we get to the comparison between the semantic and pragmatic analyses, let's 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 (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.

If the added bits are content, then we should look to a semantic analysis.

If the added bits are feeling, or something else, then we should look to a pragmatic analysis.

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 Hom calls the NPCs (non-pejorative correlates) of slurs (e.g. 'kike' and 'Jew'; or 'spic' and 'Latino').

A slur and its NPC (arguably) carries the same information.

They have logical and semantic content.

But they function differently.

III. Combinatorial Externalism

According to Hom, the best way to understand the something more in a slur than in an NPC is by appealing to institutions of prejudice.

Slurs are offensive for two general reasons.

First, they ascribe negative, derogatory properties associated with the stereotype evoked by a slur to an individual.

Second, they contain offensive, threatening content, about how one should be treated because of membership in a particular group.

Combinatorial externalism (CE) is the view that racial epithets express complex, socially constructed, negative properties determined in virtue of standing in the appropriate external, causal connection with racist institutions. The meanings of epithets are supported and semantically determined by their corresponding racist institutions. Epithets both insult and threaten their intended targets in deep and specific ways by both predicating negative properties to them and invoking the threat of discriminatory practice towards them (Hom 431).

To balance both the insult and the threat, Hom includes both a descriptive and deontic aspect to the meaning of a slur.

These meanings are represented more formally as the following complex property:

ought be subject to p^*_1, \dots, p^*_n because of being d^*_1, \dots, d^*_n all because of being NPC*,

where p^*_1, \dots, p^*_n are deontic prescriptions derived from the set of racist practices, d^*_1, \dots, d^*_n are the negative properties derived from the racist ideology, and NPC* is the semantic value of the appropriate nonpejorative correlate of the epithet (ibid).

Note that Hom's view is externalist in that the content of the slur is determined by the social institutions of racism which are external (mostly) to any particular user of a slur.

Hom understands these institutions as containing both an ideology and a set of practices.

The ideology is a set of beliefs, mainly negative, about the people within a group.

There is a range of practices which buttress and propagate racism, depending both on the larger society and the particular group.

Hom's view is externalist in its claim that the meaning of a racist term depends on factors beyond the individual user of a slur.

Recall the semantic externalism of Kripke and Putnam.

Drawing on Kripke's work on rigid designation, Putnam showed that the references of natural kind terms are determined by factors outside of the individual and can even vary with our environment.

The reference of 'elm' or 'beech' is determined not by any idea that I have of a particular tree, but by

what the botanists say about those kinds of trees.

Whether I refer to water or twater depends on whether I am on Earth or Twin Earth.

In parallel, for Hom, the offensiveness of a slur depends not on the particular attitudes that I may hold about any group, but on social institutions of racism, both their ideologies and their practices.

To defend his combinatorial externalism, Hom shows both that it accounts for a range of linguistic phenomena surrounding uses of slurs and that other analyses fail to account for those phenomena. He calls these phenomena conditions of adequacy, and they serve as a list of linguistic properties of slurs.

1. Derogatory force. Slurs convey hatred and contempt of their targets, moreso than the ascription of any particular characteristic (e.g. lazy, avaricious).
2. Derogatory variation. Different slurs have different force.
3. Derogatory autonomy. Uses of slurs are offensive even if the users of the slur do not hold the beliefs associated with the relevant stereotype.
4. Taboo. There are only rare acceptable uses of slurs; even uses in quotation, fiction, intensional contexts, questions, negations, and conditional antecedents are problematic.
5. Meaningfulness. Sentences which use slurs have understandable meanings; we can know what the racist is saying.
6. Evolution. The meaning and force of slurs can change over time.
7. Appropriation. Slurs can be appropriated, and their meanings can thus be altered.
8. Nonderogatory, nonappropriated (NDNA) uses. We can use slurs, especially in pedagogical contexts, without derogating.
9. Generality. Accounts of racial epithets should be extendable to other slurs, and even to approbative terms.

Armed with this list of characteristics, we can explore different semantic and pragmatic theories of slurs and find one which best accounts for the phenomena.

IV. Combinatorial Externalism and the Conditions of Adequacy

Hom argues both that CE meets all of the conditions of adequacy and that other accounts either do not meet them or do not meet them as well as CE does.

Hom's claims are thus quite strong.

Here, I will explore how CE accounts for the characteristics, noting some weaknesses along the way.

CE accounts for the *derogatory force* of a racist slur by appealing to the severity of the institutions which support racism.

The worse the racist social structures, the worse the slur.

The explosive, derogatory force of an epithet is directly proportional to the content of the property it expresses, which is in turn directly proportional to the turpitude and scope of the supporting racist institution that causally supports the epithet (Hom 432).

CE does a nice job with some slurs (e.g. 'nigger'), in tying the level of derogation to the level of structural racism.

Moreover, if slurs encode structural or institutional racism, then the *evolution* of the meaning of slurs is easily explained too, by the changes in our institutions and social structures.

On the other hand, on CE there is no role for individual variation in derogatory force.
Any two users of the same slur in the same society will express the same meaning with that slur.
Any account of variations in force will have to be pragmatic.

Hom calls the independence of the derogatory force from the beliefs of the user of a slur the *derogatory autonomy* of slurs.

He's right that some uses of slurs are offensive independent of the beliefs of the users of the slur.

In a footnote, Hom says that derogatory autonomy is especially problematic for expressivism.

If the offensiveness of a slur is dependent on the way in which its user expresses a derogatory view, then a user should be able to use the offensive slurs inoffensively and no-longer-very-offensive slurs in very offensive ways.

But that seems not to be the case.

The epithet 'limey' simply does not predicate as negatively, and it does not prescribe a set of practices that are as threatening. The word no longer has any significant racist institution supporting it (Hom 433)

Still, one might think that there is some role for individual beliefs to affect the severity of the offense caused by the use of a slur.

There might be limits to derogatory autonomy, in other words.

There certainly is *derogatory variation* among epithets; some slurs are worse than others.

For CE, this variation is a function of the different social structures.

Hom compares 'nigger' and 'limey' to support his claim.

Since the institutions of racism against African Americans are more pernicious and persistent than any remaining institutions of anti-English sentiment, the derogatory variation is explained.

One might wonder about 'kike' in this context, and whether CE's account is effective.

Indeed, Anderson and Lepore argue that Hom's account is vulnerable here.

To account for variation, Hom would have to propose distinct institutions for each slur, which is implausible. It is difficult to see how else Hom's externalist view could account for this important datum (Anderson and Lepore 361).

Hom claims that the structural institutions of racism can also account for the *taboo* surrounding uses of slurs.

One of the interesting facts about many slurs is that any uses of them carry that taboo.

Hom calls this property of some slurs scoping out; others call it projection.

For an example of projection, notice that 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.

The speaker of NC or NK denies that any associated stereotype holds.

Still, the speaker of NC or NK seems complicit, and to communicate something bigoted.

Similarly, compare PO1 and PO2.

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

PO1 ascribes descriptive content only conditionally.

The user of PO1 is not committed to the intelligence of David or Judith, and can deny ascribing any content at all to David or Judith.

The speaker of PO2, in contrast, offends even in a conditional use of the slur.

The offensiveness of the term in PO2 projects out of the statement.

So it seems that there is more than the content of the slur to the offense.

Hom calls the view that we should never use slurs, that the fact that they project entails that all uses are unacceptable, silentism.

He rejects silentism largely because he believes that there are acceptable uses of slurs, like *NDNA* uses, which we'll look at in a moment.

Hom also argues that silentism is a result of squeamishness, but that squeamishness does not track derogation.

We (well, most of us - I hope!) don't feel comfortable using slurs.

We don't want to offend, and we don't want other folks to think that we're racist.

But our desires to avoid offense and judgment are so great that taboos extend beyond the semantic content of the terms.

CE's apparent violation of some of the intuitions surrounding taboo (particularly the intuitions that motivate silentism) should be discounted. By offering a closer examination of the meanings of epithets, CE offers a more principled, and less "politically correct," way of carving out the appropriate constraints on their use. For example, because the meanings of some epithets entail their potential uses as literal threats, CE provides new grounds for ruling that some uses of epithets ought to be excluded from First Amendment speech protection (Hom 435).

Elsewhere, Hom explains the offensiveness of NC and NK by appeals to pragmatic factors, unlike his analysis of the offensiveness of C and K.

For C and K, the offensiveness is encoded semantically into the slur.

For NC and NK, the offensiveness can't be explained that way.

So, Hom appeals to the way in which those sentences are used.

Still, the phenomenon seems to be a major problem for a semantic view like CE.

One would like to have a uniform analysis of C and NC, of K and NK.

If NC and NK are best understood pragmatically, it seems as if the content of the slur is not semantic.

Let's return to Hom's defense at the criterion of adequacy *meaningfulness*.

Hom, remember, is arguing that the best analysis of slurs is semantic, rather than pragmatic.

One way to see whether the terms are best understood semantically is to see whether the claims made using slurs have truth values.

If they have truth values, then they have content, and so a semantic analysis would be appropriate.

If they lack truth values, then perhaps a pragmatic analysis, with felicity conditions rather than truth conditions, would be better.

If slurs did not encode particular content, we would often have trouble understanding what people mean when they use slurs, especially when we don't share the beliefs of the bigot.

But we often (usually?) know what the racist is saying.

Slurs bring out stereotypes effortlessly.

People with competence in a language 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 shifty; 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.

In support of the semantic solution, Robin Jeshion 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 a stereotype encoded in the slur.

Liz Camp invokes, "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.

Hom defends CE's account of the meaningfulness of slurs by showing that pragmatic views don't get the meaning right.

On a pragmatic view, a slur and its NPC express the same content.

Sentences like 'Chinese people are chinks' are analytic and metaphysically necessary.

But such statements aren't even true, let alone necessarily so.

Racist claims will always be false. They are certainly not necessarily and analytically true.

Racists are not only wrong in the normative sense, but also wrong about the world in falsely attributing racist properties to people (Hom 437)

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 view that slurs encode offensive content semantically.
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.

Hom's account of *appropriation* is particularly compelling.
When a slur (e.g. 'nigger' or 'faggot') is appropriated by a community, they develop what Hom calls counter-institutions for the altered use.
Then uses of a slur can both derogate and have alternative uses.
The existence of counter-institutions leads to an ambiguity in the meaning of an appropriated slur.

Lastly (setting aside *generality*, which I won't discuss here), Hom provides a long list of examples to support his claim that there are *nonderogatory, nonappropriated (NDNA) uses* of slurs.

- (13) Yao Ming is Chinese, but he's not a chink.
- (14) There are lots of Chinese people at Cal, but no chinks.
- (15) Chinese people are not chinks.
- (16) Chinks are (supposedly) despicable because of their race, but Chinese people are not.
- (17) There are no chinks; racists are wrong.
- (18) Racists believe that Chinese people are chinks.
- (19) Thinking that Chinese people are chinks is to be radically wrong about the world.
- (20) Institutions that treat Chinese as chinks are morally depraved.
- (21) Are Chinese people chinks?
- (22) Is Yao Ming a chink?
- (23) What is it to believe that Chinese people are chinks?
- (24) Why do racists think that Chinese people are chinks?
- (25) Am I racist if I believe that Chinese people are chinks?
- (26) Am I racist if I have never had the thought that Chinese people are chinks?
- (27) Am I racist if I would never think that Chinese people are chinks? (Hom 438–39)

Hom's claim that there are NDNA uses of slurs is in tension with the projection phenomenon.
If uses of slurs project in all cases, then there are no NDNA uses.
If there are NDNA uses, then there is a limit to projection.
The evidence is going to have to be at least partly intuitive.
Are Hom's 13-27 actually legitimate NDNA uses?
Do they maintain their offensiveness or not?
If Hom is correct that the offensiveness is semantically encoded, then we can't cancel their meaning.
But we might make such uses less offensive pragmatically.

There's a lot to consider here.

Hom claims that his view is best for all the conditions of adequacy.

There seem to be some questions about his arguments, especially around derogatory variation, taboo and projection, and NDNA uses.

Let's explore other options.

V. Expressivism

Kaplan's view might be seen as pragmatic, rather than semantic, though he finds 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.

"Ouch" contains some expressive content that "I am in pain" may omit.

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

You could say, "I am in pain," in such a way to express what 'ouch' means, but you could also say it without the affective content.

(Kaplan points out that Wittgenstein says that "I am in pain" means "Ouch," but let's put that aside.)

Paradigms for expressivism include terms like 'fucker' and 'asshole'.

These express an attitude without ascribing any particular content.

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!

The bigot can get the same results without even using a slur, even by using its neutral counterpart.

Contrast C with CS and CF.

CS Cheng is Chinese [said with a contemptuous sneer].

CF Cheng is a fucking Chinese.

As Anderson and Lepore report, Mark Richard defends a semantic version of expressivism.

(Two asides: 'Richard' is pronounced sort of French, as in Maurice Rocket Richard for you hockey fans. Also, Richard is a Hamilton alum.)

On Richard's proposal, the offensiveness (the attitude expressed) is part of the semantic content, but not the truth-conditional semantic content.

Richard says that truth and falsity are the wrong terms in which to evaluate a claim including racist slurs. But he still wants to encode them as part of what gets said.

We're not pursuing expressivism in enough detail here to adjudicate.

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.

The expressivist sees uses of slurs like failures of presupposition, and assimilates them with speech acts which are not truth-valuable.

The expressivist can more-easily account for projection than the proponent of a semantic analysis like Hom.

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

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

And the content is irrelevant in some cases.

Calling a Swede, "Nigger," still manages to piss off the Swede.

Moreover, some slurs have the same content but different force (e.g. 'negro' and 'nigger').

Here, it is plausible to claim that two terms can pick out the same group, with the same set of associated stereotypical properties, while not offending in the same way.

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, as Anderson and Lepore note, slurs for different groups vary in their offensiveness.

Hom accounts for this variation neatly, by appeal to the social institutions of racism.

The expressivist has to account for the variation in different attitudes of individual speakers.

But such an account seems lame.

It is implausible to suggest that attitudes of different intensity are associated with different slurs.

There is no good reason to think users of 'gook' have a more intense attitude of contempt for their target than users of 'cracker' do for theirs. Expressivists, then, are left without a viable explanation of a crucial feature of slurs (Anderson and Lepore 358).

Anderson and Lepore also criticize expressivism for not being able to account for appropriation.

If the offense is grounded in an expression of disdain, then appropriated uses seem impossible to explain.

If there were two different senses (a derogatory and approbatory one), they should be available to both in-group and out-group members.

But appropriated uses are typically not available to out-group members.

How could there be a rule that forbade people to think a certain way? Assuming the attitude is one of solidarity (as is often supposed with appropriated uses), how could there be a rule that forbids that? (Anderson and Lepore 358–9)

Here is an additional problem for expressivism, from Liz Camp.

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 *G*s; and if *g* really did produce a range of properties that deserved to be condemned, then the corresponding emotions could be warranted (Camp 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.
Camp argues for a complex version of a semantic analysis, and I'll say a bit more about it after we look at one further option, the one from Anderson and Lepore.

VI. Prohibitionism: A Third Option

One might think that there is a third option for understanding slurs and stereotypes, beyond thought (semantics) or feeling (pragmatics).
Perhaps *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 350).

The edicts which prohibit a slur are grounded in the declaration of relevant persons, ordinarily members of the target group of the slur.
The conditions for such a declaration to lead to a socially recognized taboo are complicated, as Anderson and Lepore note in the example of Jesse Jackson attempting to make 'black' taboo.
But it is fairly easy to see when such a taboo is achieved.
Once it is achieved, use of the slur is prohibited, on pain of offense.

Of course, part of the reason why slurs derogate has to do with their content.
Certainly, a slur picks out a person as a member of some group.
Anderson and Lepore do not deny that slurring terms carry at least that neutral content.
Their main goal is to show that the offensiveness of a slur is not encoded in the content.
Rather, it is the violation of the taboo, originating in the declaration of members of the targeted group, which constitutes the offensiveness.
Indeed, the slur and the NPC (or neutral counterpart) have, according to Anderson and Lepore, the same content.

We deny that slurs differ in literal content from their neutral counterparts... A slur's linguistic role is exhausted in picking out the same group as a neutral counterpart (Anderson and Lepore 356, slightly altered).

Thus, returning to Kaplan's original example, each inference (from 'that damned Kaplan' and to 'that damned Kaplan') is equivalent, semantically.

They differ only in factors which go beyond the meaning.

Notice that Anderson and Lepore's proposal easily solves the problem about projection.

For the proponent of a semantic analysis, it is difficult to see why sentences like NC or NK are offensive. In those sentences, we are negating the negative ascriptions of ideology or denying the endorsement of racist practices.

But the uses still seem offensive.

If the offensiveness is not encoded in the meanings, but just attaches to the uses of the word, as the prohibitionist claims, then the offensiveness of NC and NK seems more easily explicable.

Anderson and Lepore put the point in terms of indirect discourse, using a slur when reporting someone else's use of it.

This is a mysterious result for a content-based approach to slurs to explain, but for Prohibitionism the reason for the result is obvious. Whoever indirectly reports...is charged with an offense because in making this report the reporter violates the prohibition on the slur it contains (Anderson and Lepore 354).

Similarly, phenomena of appropriation or NDNA uses might best be explicable in terms of relaxations of the relevant prohibitions.

Anderson and Lepore don't seem to want to admit instances of relaxing the prohibitions, though.

The prohibition, once put in place, is on every *occurrence* of the slur; and occurrences cannot be eradicated (Anderson and Lepore 353)

That's an interesting question for them, I think.

Still, it's not clear that the prohibitionist's appeals to neutral content are adequate to explain the semantic properties of slurs.

As noted above, 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).

They carry some information.

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

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.

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

The declaration to which Anderson and Lepore appeal is a necessary but not sufficient condition.

The reasons why a term is taboo can be seen as the informational content of the term.

VII. The Axis

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

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.

On the pure taboo view, uses of slurs are just violations of prohibitions; they carry content, but the offensiveness is not part of that content.

Some questions, I'll call them axis questions, may help us adjudicate among these 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 are:

1. Are C and K (and such) 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 or prohibitionist 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.

Another way to discriminate between the two options has 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.

Some uses can be cancelled, especially any particular content alleged to be part of the stereotype associated with a slur.

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

Liz Camp provides an even more recent analysis of slurs and stereotypes.

She attempts to find a middle ground between the semantic and the expressivist views 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 (Camp 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.

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.