

SLURS AND STEREOTYPES

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A number of theorists have recently advocated semantic analyses of slurring terms that advance a common source of slurs' offensiveness: stereotypes of the group to which the slur is standardly applied. A *stereotype semantics of slurs* (SSS) takes (nonappropriated¹) uses of slurring terms to semantically encode and express or conventionally implicate stereotypes of the group that is referenced by the slur's neutral counterpart. So, for example, on an SSS, "S is a Nigger" expresses or implicates that S is lazy, stupid, dangerous; "S is a Kike" expresses or implicates that S is a greedy, penny-pinching schemer. Though oversimplified, these examples display how an SSS explains slurs' offensiveness—in terms of the offensiveness of properties included in stereotypes. Lynn Tirrell,² Tim Williamson,³ Christopher Hom,⁴ Adam Croom,⁵ and Liz Camp⁶ have each proposed some variety of SSS.

While stereotype views differ in various crucial respects, all can be seen as motivated by at least some of the following considerations. First, uses of slurs bring stereotypes of the referenced group to mind almost effortlessly. Second, slurs are widely regarded as extraordinarily pernicious, far more so than many other pejoratives like "jerk" or "idiot"—harming their target's self-conception and self-worth, often in ways that are common to the social group as a whole. Stereotypes seem to be a natural explanation of this effect. Third, and correlatively, slurring terms are strongly taboo in society, much more so than other pejoratives like "jerk," "asshole," and even "fucker." While many of these are taboo in various contexts, societal taboos against using slurs seem stronger and differently rooted, so an SSS appears to account for why slurs are more strongly prohibited. Fourth, some slurs seem to be more heinous, more offensive, than others. "Nigger" is said to be more offensive than "honkey" and "limey." By appealing to stereotypes, proponents of SSS possess a compelling explanation of slurs' "derogatory variation."⁷ Stereotypes of Caucasians or the French are

1. Discussions in this paper are confined to nonappropriated uses of slurs. I take up fuller discussion of appropriated uses and the process of appropriation in "Dehumanizing Slurs."
2. Tirrell [1999] advances an inferentialist semantics according to which slurs justify inferences about their targets that are codified in stereotypes of the group to which the slur's neutral counterpart applies. She largely confines theorizing to two slurs, "Nigger" and "dyke."
3. Williamson [2009] offers an account in which "S is Boche" conventionally implicates "S is cruel."
4. Hom [2008] offers a semantics specifically of racial epithets, yet clearly aims for it to generalize beyond this paradigm.
5. Croom [2011].
6. Camp [2011].
7. The term is due to Hom [2008], who presses it as a reason for semantically encoding stereotypes.

less heinous, less offensive, than stereotypes of African-Americans, and more generally, the degree of offensiveness of a slur for group G correlates with the degree of offensiveness of societal stereotypes of group G. Lastly, there are many uses of slurs that seem to demand the encoding of a stereotype. These are uses according to which “the slur’s extension is restricted to stereotype conforming members,”⁸ as in Chris Rock’s (in)famous “I love black people but I hate Niggers.” It seems that semantically encoding stereotypes is necessary to unite such uses with the more standard uses.

With such a robust set of explanatory advantages, stereotype semantics are increasingly influencing the development of theories of slurring terms. My aim here is quite simply to quell the tide. I focus upon the two best developed and most general theories, those of Hom and Camp, whose accounts differ primarily in *how* the stereotype is expressed and how the encoding of the stereotype affects truth conditions.

I. Stereotypes as Externally Determined Descriptive Contents

On Hom’s account, the offensiveness of slurring terms is rooted in their semantic content, which is determined externally and nonindividually in much the same way that natural kind terms possess externally determined contents. Just as natural kind terms’ meanings are not determined exclusively by speakers’ beliefs about the kind but also by causal relations in which speakers stand to the kind itself and the linguistic community, so too are slurring terms’ meanings not determined exclusively by speakers’ beliefs about the socially relevant group denoted by slurs’ neutral counterparts but also in part by speakers’ relations to societal institutions of racism, sexism, homophobia, and so on. Such social institutions include both an *ideology* (a set of beliefs, normally negative, about a group) and a discriminatory *set of practices* regarding how the group ought to be treated, with the ideology typically purporting to validate the practices.⁹ Slurs possess a semantic content that expresses the properties contained in the ideology together with the threat of discriminatory practices toward the group. For example, “Chink,” claims Hom, “expresses a complex socially constructed property like: ought to be subject to higher college admissions standards, and ought to be subject to exclusion from advancement to managerial positions, and . . . because of being slanty-eyed, and devious, and good at laundering, and . . . all because of being Chinese.”¹⁰ On this account, the racist who says

[1] Yao is a Chink

says something false, for neither Yao nor any Chinese person is in the extension of the predicate *Chink*, for no one ought to be subject to such practices on

8. Camp [2011] urges this rationale.

9. Hom [2008], pp. 430–431.

10. Hom [2008], p. 431.

account of being Chinese. For Hom, this result is a virtue because it explains what he takes to be intuitive: that what the racist says must be false. Furthermore, insofar as the offensiveness of the slur is rooted in and derives from social institutions themselves, the robust semantic content expressed by the slur need not be “in consciousness,” “in the mind,” “internal to” the person that uses the slur, for its content is externally determined. This too is a virtue, according to Hom, because it allows the slur to possess what he calls “derogatory autonomy,” the capacity to offend irrespective of the attitudes of the speaker that uses it. Hom’s semantic externalism even allows the theorist to explain how a speaker who is unaware of the specific ideology and practices may nevertheless be said to be at least a minimally competent user of the term. 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.

Hom’s account faces numerous challenges. One of the most basic concerns the well-known fact that the offensiveness of slurs persists across negations, conditionals, modals, and various other complex constructions. Their offensiveness is not restricted to declaratives, showing up in interrogatives, imperatives, and vocatives.

[2] Yao is not a Chink. He’s a Jap.

[3] If there are too many Chinks in the kitchen, my father won’t eat there.

[4] Is he a Chink?

[5] Get that Chink in here.

[6] Chink!

Intuitively, the source of the offensiveness of “Chink” in [1]–[6], when used by the racist, should be the same. But now consider the first sentence in [2] as asserted by a racist who denies what his fellow racist asserts in [1]. For Hom, the offensiveness in [1] is due to the speaker predicating something deeply offensive of Yao—that he ought to be subject to higher admission standards, barred from managerial positions, and so forth, all because of being Chinese. But no such symmetrical explanation is available to account for the offensiveness of the first sentence in [2], for it expresses that it is not the case that Yao ought to be subject to higher college admissions standards, subject to exclusion from advancement to managerial positions, and so forth, all because of being Chinese. To be sure, this comment about Yao pays him no compliment. But if it slurs him or Chinese people more generally, it does so in a way that differs from the way that [1] does so. The offensiveness of [1], claims Hom, resides in its asserting racist beliefs and agendas of Yao. The denial of these beliefs and agendas cannot itself be the source of [2]’s offensiveness.

While he does not address this point in print, in personal correspondence, Hom maintains that [2]’s offensiveness is to be accounted for pragmatically, not semantically. Predicates conversationally implicate that their extensions are nonempty, so the mere use of “Chink” in [2] offends because it conversationally implicates that there are some individuals that ought to be subject to higher admission standards, subject to social exclusion, and so on, all because

of being Chinese. This move does provide an explanation of [2]'s offensiveness, but is not without problems.¹¹ The most pressing is that it fails to explain the offensiveness of [2] *along the same lines* as it does that of [1], which is counterintuitive, as they seem equally offensive and for the same reason. While [2] might not derogate Yao in particular, it does derogate all Chinese persons just as surely as [1] does. Yet it would be strange to explain the offensiveness of [1] in terms of the ascription to Yao of the racist agenda while the offensiveness in [2] is explained only in terms of the conversational implicature that there are individuals in the extension of "Chink." Furthermore, if the offensiveness in [2] is accounted for entirely as a conversational implicature, it ought to be cancelable, yet it is not. The racist that asserts [2] cannot leave the semantic content of [2] intact while retracting, canceling, the implicature that the extension of "Chink" is nonempty, an implicature that is itself supposed to account for [2]'s offensiveness. Following up [2] with "No intended smear on the Chinese. In fact, there are no individuals that ought to be subject to higher admission standards, and so on, all because of being Chinese" makes no sense as coming from the racist, and even if it were allowed, it would not cancel the offensiveness of the first sentence in [2].

A second problem or set of problems concerns the evaluation of [1] as false and, in particular, how this analysis of truth conditions tallies with an account of the content and truth conditions of [1]'s denial as given in [2]. Many share Hom's avowed intuition that what the racist says in [1] cannot be true.¹² Hom goes further, maintaining that [1] is not just lacking in truth (and hence truth-valueless) but is, rather, false. Now, I agree—of course—that what the racist says in [1] is heinous and destructive. However, I have no theory-independent "intuition" that what the racist says is false or is lacking in truth-value or that my moral disapproval should be explained by the fact that what the racist says is false or lacking in truth-value. After all, my disapproval may be directed at a nontruth conditionally relevant component of the semantic content of [1] or at a performative aspect of the assertion, of what the racist does in asserting [1].

Bracket this for now. Regardless of one's intuitive judgment about whether [1] should come up false, analyzing [1] as false requires (assuming a standard logic) that its negation is true. But [1] can be negated by the first sentence in [2]. The content of [2] as analyzed by Hom is that Yao is not deserving of higher admissions standards and so on all because of being Chinese. While this might seem adequate insofar as the content is true, the content does not account for the fact (does not *express*) that what the speaker is denying is that

11. Here I ignore the issue of whether a use of a predicate generally conversationally implicates that the predicate has a nonempty extension. I leave this to the side as it is not entirely implausible and is, moreover, independent of matters specifically pertaining to slurring terms.
12. Compare, notably, Richard [2008], who advances different reasons for rejecting the truth of all slur-utterances. In particular, he does not offer up an intuition that they must be false (which he rejects), or that they must be truth-valueless. Instead, he offers up an argument concerning complicity with racists: if we accept [1] as true, we must think "what and as the racist thinks." As this makes our thinking racist as well, we cannot accept [1] as true. I discuss this argument together with others concerning the truth of utterances containing slurs in "The Truth About Slurs."

Yao is Chinese, not that he should not be subject to certain racist agendas and beliefs.

A third problem is that the overall racist ideology's being descriptively expressed leaves Hom's account unable to deal with rational applications of the term in known counterinstances. A hyperrational racist and expert on the stereotypes of Chinese people could consciously believe that Yao has *none* of the properties in the ideology, yet may still slur him by calling him "Chink" or by uttering [1]. Racists regularly recognize "exceptions" to stereotypes without it impinging upon their tendencies to apply the slur: "Yao Ming's cool, not devious or undeserving of his fame or anything, but he's still a Chink." There are ways to patch this problem, as we'll see in a moment, but for Hom the concern is a serious one.

Fourth, the semantic content of the term is overwrought. It attributes highly specific sets of ideologies and modes of treating the group, yet it is doubtful that anything so semantically rich and well defined is semantically encoded in the slur. Surely "Chinks should be subject to higher admissions standards" is not an analytic truth. Correlatively, it attributes as a matter of the term's content a perverse, though highly intellectualist, "justification" for the negative practices on the basis of ideology: Chinese ought to be excluded from managerial positions on account of being slanty-eyed and good at laundering, which are all due to being Chinese. Must the racist *mean* something so refined, so rationalized? This too is doubtful. Notice that whether the racist possesses, "has in mind," such a refined content is not what is at issue. Hom's externalism skirts this issue. I grant and, indeed, myself support semantic externalism, regarding it as operative for many terms, even certain types of slurs that do encode stereotypes. Take, for example "Jewish American Princess" or "Uncle Tom," as in these sentences:

[7] She is quite the Jewish-American princess.

[8] Gee, he's a real Uncle Tom.

In [7] and [8], specific stereotypical properties are expressed with the pejorative expressions: being pampered, self-centered, whiney, and materialistic in [7], being subservient (perhaps just to whites) or submissive in the face of threat in [8]. Utterances of these terms do encode (in some fashion) the stereotypical properties, even if the speaker fails to have them in mind, though I maintain that such a failure would betray inadequate, not just minimal, linguistic understanding of the term. By contrast, with the slurring terms specifically under discussion here—"Chink," "Kike," "dyke," and so forth, nothing so conceptually contentful, so stereotypical, is expressed at all, *regardless of what is in the speaker's mind*. I develop this key point more deeply below.

Fifth, in Hom's analysis, ideologies about the group as well as sets of practices regarding the treatment of its members must antedate the slur. This is a problem because the slurring of a group can play a significant role in the development of such ideologies and practices. Many believe it is appropriate to exclude Chinese people from advancement to managerial positions *because* they antecedently think of them contemptuously—a way of thinking manifest and

encouraged by the presence of and uses of the slur “Chink.” To be sure, developments of racist stereotypes are complexly related to the history of their correlative slurs, and I would not rest a case against any SSS on this matter. However, if slurs semantically encode stereotypes externally in the way adduced by Hom, the resources available for explaining the complex causal interplay between slur use and stereotype development will be considerably less robust than is ideal.

II. Stereotypes as Generics

Several of the problems besetting Hom’s analysis can be sidestepped by making two fundamental alterations to the way that slurs semantically encode stereotypes. The first alteration is the separation of the truth-conditionally relevant component of the slur from its expression of a stereotype. On such an account, slurs possess two separable components of conventional meaning. One component is reference to the class of individuals referenced by the slur’s neutral counterpart. Only this component figures into truth-conditions of utterances containing the slur. The other component is the expression of a stereotype of the group referenced by the slur’s neutral counterpart, which accounts for the slur’s offensiveness yet does not factor into truth conditions. The second alteration involves construing the semantic representation of stereotypes as somehow encoded as a generic rather than a descriptive condition in the style of Hom. The generics analysis encodes stereotypes as a set of negative, communally shared ways of thinking of the group that may involve canonical iconic representations of what are regarded as typical members of the group, with certain features of the group’s members specially salient and central, together with various assumptions about how to treat the group, all the while allowing for exceptions.¹³

Camp [2011]¹⁴ proposed just such a dual-level semantics of slurs, and though in this volume she has abandoned some of its strongest commitments,¹⁵ as one of the most sophisticated in the literature, her semantics merits extensive discussion. On her account, the anti-Semite that asserts

[9] Jake is a Kike

expresses a content that is true if Jake is Jewish and, additionally, expresses and endorses as an appropriate way of thinking of Jews the societal stereotype

13. I make no assumptions here about exactly how to spell out this “generic” encoding of stereotypes. It can be seen as akin to cognitive psychologists’ prototype analyses of concepts (cf. Rosch [1973, 1983]), an account to which Croom [2011] sympathizes. Or it can be given by a semantics of generics. The fundamental point for Camp is that they admit of exceptions and need not be descriptively expressed. Compare also Tirrell [1999], who maintains that those that use slurs undertake commitment to most, though not all, stereotypical beliefs about and representations of the group.

14. Elisabeth Camp [2011], “Slurs, Semantics, and Stereotypes,” presented at the Syracuse Philosophy Annual Workshop and Network 2011.

15. Elisabeth Camp [2013], “Slurring Perspectives,” *Analytic Philosophy* 54: 330–349.

of Jews, including the properties of being greedy, scheming, and stingy. By separating the truth-conditionally relevant semantic contribution from that of the stereotype, one can produce a common explanation of the offensiveness of the slur in negations, modals, and various other complex constructions. The offensiveness in [9], as with [1]–[6], derives just from the expressed stereotype. The separated dual levels of content mark an advance by allowing that utterances with slurs can express truths and falsehoods and succeed as denials of other utterances containing slurs without interfering with our ability to ascribe a constant offensive content. The anti-Semite who utters

[10] Jake is not a Kike

with the aim of correcting his fellow anti-Semite who asserted [9] is, on this account, expressing the denial that Jake is Jewish and still expressing the same offensive content as expressed in [9]. Taking stereotypes to be represented as generics also advances the stereotype view. No problems ensue with the rational application of slurs to targets believed to be counterinstances to the stereotype. An anti-Semite could believe Jake to be generous and honest, yet still slur him by asserting [9]. Additionally, the content of the expressed stereotype will appear less overwrought than in the Hom view, for it does not work in whole ideologies that purport to justify the negative views of and practices toward the group but rather in only a loose set of stereotypical characterizations of the group.

Camp's view, to be sure, marks an advance in stereotype semantics. But I challenge its most fundamental claim—that a speaker who uses a slur thereby expresses and endorses a stereotype, generically characterized, of the group that the slurring term references. Camp claims that, intuitively, you could not be competent with “Kike” without understanding it as encoding stereotypes of Jews. After all, the stereotype is what “explains why bigots take a derogatory attitude toward members of the targeted group to be warranted.”¹⁶ Yet this rationale for requiring the encoding of stereotypes is questionable. There are many reasons why bigots take their attitudes to be warranted. Some will involve stereotypes, but some will not. Some people hate and hold contempt for gays and lesbians because the thought of same-gender sex disgusts or scares them or because it is banned in the Bible. The roots of rationales for anti-Semitism are notoriously multifaceted, but, to be sure, some people hate and hold contempt for Jews and regard it as warranted because they are not Christian or because members of more religious branches are insular and look, act, and dress differently. Moreover, this point's relevance to the semantics of slurs is shaky. Even when a stereotype explains why a bigot takes a derogatory attitude toward a group, the stereotype need not be semantically encoded in the slur. More generally, it is not clear what explanatory advantage is secured here by positing semantically expressed stereotypes. Everything that needs to be explained about the speaker who is ignorant of Jewish stereotypes can be done by a theory without semantically encoded stereotypes. The SSS

16. Camp [2011], p. 8.

proponent's appeal to the subject's inadequate linguistic understanding will just be matched by appeal to his lacking stereotypical associations with Jews themselves, together with his knowledge that "Kike" is a hateful term for Jews.

Camp also invokes the cancelability test as an independent rationale for why slurs express stereotypes: Whatever is semantically encoded cannot be coherently canceled. Yet a user of a slur cannot felicitously disavow commitment to the stereotype, cannot "deny that *G*s or some significant subset thereof are prone to displaying anything in the ballpark of the stereotypical features."¹⁷ Yet a user of the neutral counterpart can. The one who slurs using [1] and [9] cannot successfully cancel commitment to the stereotypes of Chinese and Jews, respectively, whereas, clearly one who utters

[11] Yao is Chinese

[12] Jake is a Jew

can. To this, two points. One, I grant that it is natural to have an intuition that slur users cannot felicitously disavow commitment to the stereotype, while neutral-counterpart users can. But this intuition, if that is what it is, stems from comparing users of slurs with users of neutral counterparts who lack contempt or other hateful attitudes toward their targets. Users of slurs possess—and I think express—contempt for their targets. Many users of neutral counterparts, users of [11] and [12], do not. But if we compare, rather, users of slurs with users of neutral counterparts who *do* possess and express contempt for their targets, we find no asymmetry in intuition about the possibility of canceling commitment to the stereotype. Instead of comparing [1] and [9] with [11] and [12], respectively, compare the former set with [13a], [13b], [14a], and [14b].

[13a] Yao is *Chinese*^C

[13b] Yao is a fucking Chinese

[14a] Jake is a *Jew*^C

[14b] Jake is a fucking Jew

Here, the italics indicates the expression of the intonational stress given by the term's subscript, and the "C" superscript indicates contempt. In these examples, as with [1] and [9], one might presume, even with some *prima facie* justification, that the speaker is committed to the stereotype. Now, of course, Camp's point was that there is an asymmetry between slur uses and neutral counterpart uses, not between slurs and neutral counterparts coupled with intonational stress or an intensifier. I grant that. But what [13a]–[14b] help illustrate is that any intuitions of the uncancelability of commitment to the stereotype may just flow from the speaker's contemptuous attitude toward the group *qua* group, something that makes salient the group's stereotype, which in turn makes us question whether the speaker can disavow it. The intuition of uncancelability need not and, I maintain, does not flow from

17. Camp [2011], p. 17. Cf. also Potts [2007] and Richard [2008].

the semantics. In fact, it is equally well explained by any semantics in which slurs conventionally express contempt for their targets.

Two, while we can explain, as I just did, intuitions why stereotypes are not cancelable with other resources, one *can* in fact disavow, cancel, commitment to them. Such intuitions may be overturned. Someone who finds homosexuality repulsive and homosexuals worthy of contempt, yet possesses no knowledge whatsoever of any stereotypes associated with homosexuality—no cultural knowledge of stereotypes of gays being effeminate, sexually promiscuous, “stylin’” dressers—could call someone “queer” or “faggot” while manifesting complete linguistic competence. Upon being informed of the stereotypes that, let us assume, are activated in the minds of hearers, the speaker might be appalled. She could coherently avow “I disdain those queers; anyone who would do that is sick. But I do not endorse those as the right ways of thinking about queers. I have no idea who does it, what they are like, and I don’t care. I just think those queers should be locked up.”¹⁸ This example is not anomalous. Much racism and bigotry is rooted simply in finding others “different”—often because of physical characteristics. A racist could call someone “Chink” to express contempt for the target on the basis of her ethnicity but be entirely uninformed of stereotypes of Chinese as being unfit for managerial positions, bad drivers, and so on, and when informed of these stereotype features could successfully deny endorsement of them.¹⁹

The cancelability test for determining semantically encoded content is notoriously controversial. Attempts to cancel commitment may function to shift the context, making the context of utterance of the original claim different from the context of the cancellation. I shall not take a stand on this here. But notice that *if* cancelability is an adequate test for content not being semantically encoded and if the argument just adduced against the alleged uncanceledness of stereotypes is sound, then it constitutes a positive argument as to why any SSS is incorrect.

Two additional reasons for questioning any SSS concern the inadequacy of appealing only to stereotypes to locate the primary, linguistically encoded offensiveness of slurs.²⁰ First, there are bona fide slurs for groups for which there are not any corresponding societal stereotypes. Take the Yiddish “Goyim,”

18. Notice that it is illegitimate here to call upon externalism to patch the problem. Cancelability is being offered up as rationale for encoding the stereotype, but if externally grounded encoding of the stereotype is being assumed to preclude cancellation, the move would be assuming what needs to be established.
19. Note that while certain physical and cultural characteristics of a racial or ethnic group are encoded in stereotypes of that group, and having same-gender sex is encoded in stereotypes of gays and lesbians, it cannot be expected that a slur user deny *these*, for they will come automatically with knowing what defines the group itself.
20. In speaking of the primary linguistically encoded source of slurs’ offensiveness, I mean *any* offensiveness that derives from either semantically encoded content or pragmatic content from conventional implicatures. Any theory of slurs’ offensiveness can tack on additional, extralinguistic sources of offensiveness. For example, slurs can be regarded as taboo words, or at least taboo in certain contexts, and breaking taboos typically offends. Anderson and Lepore [2011] rightly emphasize the significance of taboos as a source of slurs’ offensiveness, yet, to my mind wrongly, excise all linguistically encoded sources, taking taboo breaking as the sole reason for slurs’ offensiveness.

used to refer pejoratively to all non-Jews, and “Shiksa” to refer to non-Jewish women and girls. Japanese has a similar term, “Gai-jin,” which literally means “outside person,” to refer wholesale to non-Japanese. Without a societal stereotype to draw upon, the theory lacks the resources to explain the offensiveness of these terms. Second, there are instances of slur use for which we lack a compelling explanation of their unequivocal offensiveness. Many stereotypes contain, among their negative features, many neutral or positive features as well. Stereotypes of Chinese people, in addition to the negative features cited by Hom, surely include being hardworking; top test-takers; rule-abiding, though perhaps excessively so; devoted to family, especially the elderly; and being technologically savvy. Yet if those properties are what racists express in calling someone “Chink,” then the slur is as much a compliment as derogatory. But it is not: the slur is *unequivocally and exclusively* contemptuous.

Might it be that positive features are somehow swamped by negative features? This response strikes me as naïve. Slurs’ offensiveness is not derived by summing up degrees of positive and negative utility in various features.

A far more plausible response is to maintain that the so-called neutral or positive features encoded in “Chink” are not, in fact, construed or represented as neutral or positive within the stereotype. Their representation is imbued with negative affect, typically hateful, belittling, or contemptuous. So a defender of an SSS might maintain that the descriptive or conceptual specification of the features in the stereotype does not suffice to capture a representation of the stereotype. Negative affective content must supplement all the representations of features in the stereotype. Such negative affect is usefully compared to the negative affect, expressed linguistically with shifts in intonation. We saw that in [13a] and [14a],

[13a] Yao is *Chinese*^C

[14a] Jake is a *Jew*^C

the speaker’s contempt toward those who are Chinese and Jewish, respectively, is marked with the contemptuous intonation and underwrites our attributing to the speaker contemptuous representations of Chinese and Jewish people on account of their ethnicity. Likewise, many purely descriptive representations of features within a stereotype need affective supplementation. Thus, the quality *being a top test-taker* would be *being a top test-taker*^S, where the subscript “S” indicates a scornful, resenting, or otherwise derisive representation. This appears to be exactly what is needed to meet the charge, for then the stereotype’s offensiveness is unequivocally and exclusively contemptuous, just like the slur’s offensiveness.

I applaud this move: there is no way to capture the representation of stereotypes of socially significant groups without *somehow* incorporating multifaceted affective attitudes “attached” to some of the stereotypes’ features. But now notice that this marks a radical shift in an SSS. Insofar as slurs semantically encode stereotypes with affective content, the view now incorporates the fundamental theoretical commitment of an *expressivist* semantics of slurs: that the offensiveness of slurs is explained by their expressing negative affective

attitudes toward their targets. The shift, however, radically bloats the view's semantics, making it even more fine-grained than it already was, necessitating that competent speakers not only know canonical properties inherent in stereotypes but also possess the relevant negative attitudes toward those specific properties or at least express such attitudes via externalist channels. I have already argued that, even without representing affective states, the semantics becomes overly bloated, as tests for cancelability reveal. To be sure, adding affective states is necessary to capture the derogation expressed with weapon uses of slurs, but once this step has been taken, there is no reason to include the stereotype at all, for the expression of negative affect itself does the explanatory work to account for slurs' offensiveness.

These reflections steer us toward an expressivist semantics for slurs, one that I cannot embark upon here, not even provisionally.²¹ But expressivist views, and indeed, all non-stereotype views, are bereft of a clean explanation of two important phenomena: slurs' extended uses, as in Chris Rock's "I love black people, but I hate Niggers," and slurs' derogatory variation, that some slurs seem to be far more offensive than others. Isn't the encoding of stereotypes necessary to explain them?

The uses of slurs discussed thus far are applied by bigots exclusively and wholesale to those in the group referenced by the slur's neutral counterpart. Let us distinguish these basic uses from two broader uses that I will dub "nonliteral." One involves applications to only those members of the group referenced by the slur that are stereotype-conforming, as exemplified in Rock's quip. The other involves applications to those perceived to be exhibiting properties in the stereotype of the slur's neutral counterpart, yet who are not members of the group, as when someone says to an Arab cab driver, "I don't tip Niggers," knowing perfectly well that the driver is not African-American, or when someone swears "fucking Kike" at a business competitor known to be non-Jewish to express anger at the competitor's perceived greed.²² Now, it is true that the stereotype, or an aspect of it, that is "associated" with the group that the slur references in its basic uses is what contributes to determining the extension of both nonliteral uses of that slur. But this is not a good argument against an expressivist view or a point in favor of an SSS. We need not, and I think ought not, give a single semantic analysis to the basic and nonliteral uses. To explain the nonliteral uses, one who adopts an expressivist semantics of literal uses need only appeal to the stereotype being *associated* with the slur; the stereotype need not be part of its semantics. Note that we would not and should not accept a similar style of argument with respect to nonslurring terms for groups that are stereotyped. So, for example, "girl" used literally has in its extension girls and only girls. But it can also be used "nonliterally," as when young boys call other boys "girl" if they are insufficiently sporty, are inadequate

21. I develop a three-tiered analysis in "Dehumanizing Slurs."

22. Tirrell [1999, p. 45] argues that such uses as these and others ("white Niggers," "niggers of our time," "students are niggers") indicate that the stereotype of being subservient, cheap labor, or of a lower class is crucial, while the racial element is less central than is often assumed. I doubt this. In basic uses, the racial element seems to me crucial, though this does not preclude the development of extended uses.

in hiding their feelings, care to be clean, and so on. The role that stereotypes play in functioning to generate this nonliteral meaning should not incline us to change the semantics of “girl” used literally.

What about derogatory variation? Don’t varying degrees of offensiveness in stereotypes of different groups best explain the derogatory variation of slurs? And isn’t an expressivist analysis unable to accommodate it? I do not share any such clear intuition that some slurs express contents worse than others. What is dubbed a direct intuition about content may be rooted in nonsemantic factors such as perception of variations in the degree to which some slurs are taboo and prohibited, the degree to which various group are oppressed in society, and frequency of application of different slurs. Of course, some slurs might be more taboo because they are worse to say. But that does not entail that what makes them worse to say is that stereotypes are *semantically* encoded. But this matter deserves more extensive discussion than I can offer here.²³

Appendix

Embracing Corruption: A Response to Hom and May

Hom and May (H&M)²⁴ advocate *null extensionality*, the thesis that all pejorative terms have empty extensions. Null extensionality is all-encompassing, pertaining to at least three varieties of lexical items, including (a) simple pejorative expressions in the language, like “Kike,” “Chink,” and “faggot”; (b) complex expressions formed by combining pejorative modifiers with neutral counterpart terms, like “dirty Jew,” “fucking Chinese,” and “goddamn homosexual”; (c) the combination of a neutral expression with a sneering or contemptuous tone or a gesture, as in *Jew^c*, *Chinese^c*.²⁵ H&M claim that all of these are lexically marked at an abstract level that can be represented by PEJ, a covert marker of pejoration. PEJ, they claim, “functionally combines with any characteristic counterpart term, *t*, designating race, gender, religion, class, and so forth to form a pejorative, PEJ(*t*).” A term is a pejorative expression if and only if it is lexically represented as PEJ(Ξ); by null extensionality, if an expression has a nonnull extension, it is not a pejorative.

H&M claim that null extensionality holds because “there are no morally evaluable traits (good or bad) that are heritable on the basis of race, gender, sexual orientation, and the like.” “Heritability” is misleading here. What they mean is that there are no morally evaluable traits (good or bad) that are possessed in virtue of being of a certain race, gender, sexual orientation, and the like. Why does this claim—a claim about the world and morality, not about

23. I focus discussion on derogatory variation within the context of a positive expressivist account in “Dehumanizing Slurs.”

24. Christopher Hom and Robert May [2013], “Moral and Semantic Innocence,” *Analytic Philosophy* 54: 293–313.

25. To indicate such nonlinguistic markers, I use the convention of italicizing the neutral content that is operated on and indicate the type of attitude accompanying it, either by tone or gesture, with a superscript. Here, the superscript “c” indicates the expression of contempt.

linguistic expressions—justify null extensionality? Their guiding idea is that an expression like “Kike” semantically encodes the descriptive content *ought to be the target of negative moral evaluation because of being Jewish*. That (purported) semantic fact coupled with the nonsemantic moral fact that no one ought to be the target of negative moral evaluation because of being Jewish generates their result that “Kike” has an empty extension. To generalize to secure the class of pejorative expressions, PEJ(Ξ) is taken to be a concept abstracted from moral truths like the one just stated. From it, the abstract lexical concept PEJ is the concept “*x* ought to be the target of negative moral evaluation because of being Ξ .”

By making PEJ abstracted from moral truths and the null extensionality thesis definition of pejoratives, H&M are forced to maintain that any apparent pejorative expression that applies to a group of individuals for which contempt is an appropriate moral attitude is *not* in fact a pejorative expression. Suppose (plausibly) that exploiting women and children by selling their bodies to others for sex makes individuals who do so worthy of negative moral evaluation on account of so doing. Suppose this is a moral fact. Then, for H&M, “pimp” and “dirty pimp” are *not* pejorative expressions. If being a Nazi makes one worthy of negative moral evaluation for being a Nazi, then “fucking Nazi” is not a pejorative expression.

H&M acknowledge this astonishing point, noting of Nazis and pedophiles, “hateful words directed at these groups would not be pejoratives,” though “they may be socially sanctioned in ways that pejoratives are not.” This consequence is implausible in the extreme, and for three related but separable reasons.

First, pretheoretically, it is intuitively plausible that the following expressions should receive the same form of linguistic analysis: “Kike,” “Chink,” “faggot,” “pimp,” “redneck.” Similarly, the elements in the following two sets of complex expressions should receive the same form of linguistic analysis: “fucking Jew,” “fucking Nazi,” “fucking Fundamentalist,” “fucking teabagger”; “goddamn homosexual,” “goddamn sexist,” “goddamn one-percenter,” “goddamn liar.” Ditto for the following combinations of extralinguistic and linguistic expressions: “*Jew*^C,” “*Nazi*^C,” “*pedophile*^C.” Suppose that, say, Nazis, pedophiles, and exploitative sex brokers are worthy of contempt for being Nazis, pedophiles, and exploitative sex brokers, respectively; but Jews, Chinese, and homosexuals are not worthy of contempt for being Jewish, Chinese, and homosexual, respectively. Then, for H&M, the expressions for the latter group are pejoratives, but those for the former are *not*. The asymmetrical treatment of these classes of expressions is wildly implausible.

Second, for H&M, linguistic conventions are irrelevant for determining whether an expression is a pejorative. Are “pimp,” “fucking pimp,” or “*pimp*^C” pejorative expressions? Forget that many a dictionary marks “pimp” as a derogatory expression. Forget that when speakers front “pimp” with “fucking” or accompany “pimp” with a sneering tone, they intend for what they say to be pejorative. Forget that when they do so, they are employing the same linguistic conventions they use to signal pejoration with other terms that do generate pejoration, conventions H&M themselves acknowledge as conventional means

of generating pejoration. But it is absurd for linguistic conventions governing meanings and uses to play no role in determining whether an expression is pejorative.

The third problem is the flip side of the second, concerning what *does* determine whether an expression is a pejorative. Is “goddamn liar” a pejorative expression? What about “scummy one-percenter”? For H&M, the answers depend alternately upon the moral status of lying and upon the guilt or innocence of the one percent for the ills of economic injustice. But it is bizarre to regard the *moral facts* as deciding these questions. Morality has no sway over the lexical properties of expressions. And lexicality does not somehow “mirror” morality. Note that I am *not* suggesting that moral facts play no role in determining whether there are individuals in the extension of, say, *ought to be subject to negative moral evaluation for being a liar*. That I am granting. My point is that the moral facts do not decide the lexical standing of an expression *as a pejorative*, which is what H&M embrace with their commitment to PEJ being abstracted from moral facts and null extensionality as defining the class of pejoratives.

Appealing to a distinction between being socially sanctioned and not being so only makes matters worse, because obviously, what is socially sanctioned often has nothing to do with the dictates of morality. In Nazi Germany, expressions that H&M count as pejoratives, like “Kike” and “dirty Jew,” were socially sanctioned, while expressions they say are not pejoratives, like “fucking Nazi,” were surely not.

Reading H&M’s semantics left me wondering how it squares with that of Hom [2008].²⁶ Hom [2008] maintains that slurring terms like “Chink” and “Kike” semantically encode stereotypes of the group referenced by the slurring term’s neutral counterpart. H&M’s semantics leaves this off entirely. Has Hom altered his semantics? If so, has he also altered his commitment to derogatory variation, the thesis that slurring terms vary in the intensity of their offensiveness, or in his claim that the semantics of slurring terms is what explains derogatory variation? After all, H&M’s semantics offers a common template for the conceptual content of different slurs, one that seems incompatible with a semantic explanation of derogatory variation.

H&M argue that expressivism (a version of which I have advanced²⁷) faces four problems. Their development of each involves question-begging assumptions. Here I only address two. Consider their claim that expressivism faces an instance of Frege’s Puzzle because it “posits that ‘Jew’ and ‘kike’ have identical semantic values.” The challenge, they claim, is to explain how [1] is knowable *a priori* while [2] is knowable *a posteriori*.

- [1] Jews are Jews
- [2] Jews are Kikes

26. Christopher Hom [2008], “The Semantics of Racial Epithets,” *Journal of Philosophy* 105 (8), 416–440.

27. Presented in “The Truth About Slurs” at Harvard and the 2011 American Philosophical Association Pacific Division meeting, San Diego, and in “Dehumanizing Slurs” at the University of Southern California, University of California–Los Angeles, and the 2011 Society for Exact Philosophy meeting, Winnipeg.

An expressivist need not accept that there is a version of Frege's Puzzle here. Expressivists, at least expressivists like me, do not maintain that "Jew" and "Kike" are semantically equivalent. They maintain *only* that they are truth-conditionally equivalent. "Kike" has a distinctive semantic component associated with the expression of contempt toward Jews for being Jews, one that is separable from its truth-conditional component. While [1] is knowable a priori, so too is the truth-conditionally relevant component of [2]. This fact is perhaps more easily recognized by considering alternatives to [2] that transpose the order of the identity statement or employ a different mode of expressing PEJ(*Jew*), as in [2a–d]:

- [2a] Kikes are Jews
- [2b] Jews are *Jews*^C
- [2c] *Jews*^C are Jews
- [2d] Dirty Jews are Jews

Given the symmetry of identity presumed in Frege's Puzzle²⁸ and their views on PEJ, H&M are committed to maintaining that the expressivist regards each of [2a–d] as semantically equivalent to [2]. But, as these exhibit, it is far from clear that these are not knowable *a priori*. In any case, that needs to be argued for, not assumed.

The same mistake surfaces in their modal conceivability argument. H&M maintain that it is conceivable for there to be Jews without Kikes. Since whatever is conceivable is possible, it is possible for there to be Jews without Kikes. This is supposed to present a problem because the conclusion is inconsistent with the expressivist's commitment to the identity of the extension of "Jew" and "Kike." Again, the expressivist can and should just deny the first premise of the argument that it is conceivable for there to be Jews without Kikes. There is no problem in doing so and, in particular, conceiving a morally perfect world devoid of anti-Semitism does nothing to advance the case that there is. After all, imagining a morally imperfect world in which all Jews are subject to anti-Semitism does not and should not incline us to maintain that it is conceivable for there to be Kikes without Jews.

For H&M, those of us who regard slurs and their neutral counterparts as truth conditionally equivalent promote *moral corruption*. Yet this "moral corruption" can be seen as merely denying that our moral disapproval of racists' use of slurs can be explained at the level of referential content. This seems strange only when we focus upon referential content alone, to the neglect of what explains slurs' heinousness. What divides racist from nonracist is not their

28. By invoking this as a version of Frege's Puzzle, Hom and May are themselves committed to maintaining that the expressivist upholds symmetry of identity. I am simply presuming it here. I believe that these so-called versions of Frege's Puzzle are exceptionally poor tests for discerning the semantic structure of pejorative expressions *in part* because transposing the order of the occurrence of the pejorative and its neutral counterpart often shift what is conversationally at issue or relevant, the truth-conditional component or the expressive component.

beliefs about which individuals exist in the world but rather their attitudes toward those individuals that both most assuredly realize exist.

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