Slurs Aren't Special

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Last revised March 1, 2013

> The surest sign that a group or society has entered into the self-conscious possession of a new concept is that a corresponding vocabulary will be developed, a vocabulary which can then be used to pick out and discuss the concept with consistency. Quentin Skinner, "The Idea of a Cultural Lexicon"

> Were there any perverts before the latter part of the nineteenth century? Ian Hacking, "Making Up People"

The Invention of Slurs

Were there any racial or ethnic slurs before 1940? That's about when *slur* was first applied to a word that derogated someone on the basis of race or religion, rather than simply as "an expression or suggestion of disparagement or reproof"—still the only definition that the *Oxford English Dictionary* gives for the noun.[1] Even that date is misleadingly early: this use of the word of the appeared only in African American publications like *Jet* and the *Chicago Defender* until the early 1960's, when it began to show up in mainstream publications like *Time* and the *New York Times*. Of course there have always been words that derogate people on the basis of their membership in a certain group, but before the mid-twentieth century there was no one English term that gathered such words as a class. And while some of the items we now describe as slurs

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[1] The OED entry for the noun *slur* has not been revised since 1912, so includes no sense for the use of the word to refer to words like *fag* or *wop*. But other dictionaries compiled much later than that also miss the "offensive or insulting word" sense of the noun (the sense that figures in "he was fired for using a vile racial slur beginning with n"). The *American Heritage* defines it simply as "A disparaging remark; an aspersion" (though I'm assured that a new definition is in the works) and Merriam-Webster defines it as "an insulting or disparaging remark or innuendo." Needless to say, *fag* and *wop* are not remarks, aspersions, or innuendos. *Epithet,* too*,* was first applied to explicitly racial and ethnic derogations in the 1940's in African American writing (it shows up in the 1945 autobiography of Langston Hughes) and began to appear in the mainstream white press in the 1960's.

were called out for obloquy in earlier eras, the moral tenor of the objections was different. Nineteenth-century condemnations by whites of the use of *nigger*, for example, were usually focused on the vulgarity of the speaker and insult to his (white) addressees rather than to the target—to use the word, an observer wrote in 1835, demonstrated "a scorn of those rules which every man who respects himself, and is unwilling to be classed with the lowest vulgar, observes." And the offense, when one was discerned, wasn't seen as the kind of incivility that undermined the conduct of public life, much less as a matter worthy of serious philosophical or philological scrutiny. Like some other modern social phenomena—the asshole, the (internet) troll, or date rape—the slur as such is a recent addition to our moral inventory.

The new sense of *slur* belonged to a new vocabulary of race and social diversity—the clutch of new isms and morally charged labels ("color blind," "hate speech," "racial sensitivity") that pervaded the culture wars in which slurs, real and alleged, played a central symbolic role. In the course of things, the slur was assigned a new moral etiology: it was condemned not for the ill-breeding or coarseness that the word betrayed in the speaker as for the insult and injury it inflicted on its targets, who were themselves no longer without a voice in the discussions. Indeed, as its genesis in the African American media suggests, the rise of the new meaning of *slur* coincided with the emergence of a doctrine of linguistic self-determination, which held that every group should have the right to determine what it should—and, even more important, should not—be called.

It was inevitable—politically, institutionally, intellectually—that philosophers and linguists would be drawn to examine slurs, bringing insights of their disciplines to bear on an issue at the heart of many of the ambient cultural controversies.[2] And as it happens, slurs also seem to offer an excellent test bed for exploring some longstanding theoretical issues. How do words come by their capacity to express emotion or convey contempt? What can words signify over and above what they say about the world? The questions seem to bear directly on the

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[2] Derogative terms had already made their way into the philosophical literature by 1973, when Dummett used them to exemplify the difference between the grounds for applying a concept and the consequences of its application. But his choice of the quaint epithet *boche* as an example suggested a disinclination to connect these questions to their sociopolitical significance, notwithstanding his personal engagement in these issues.

debates between expressivists and descriptivists in metaethics and on the ongoing semantic investigations of non-truth-conditional aspects of meaning, among other things.[3]

But that double perspective can induce a certain wall-eyed tension. On the one hand, the slur-*qua*-slur is a category that cries out for thick description, in Clifford Geertz's sense of the phrase: it can't be neatly plucked from the custard of late twentieth-century social attitudes that it's steeped in. But to address slurs as a general linguistic phenomenon, you have to step back, abstracting the category from the immediate historical setting that gives it its cultural relevance and invests it with a sense of moral urgency. Sociologists or social historians might be content to consider slurs as a phenomenon unique to contemporary society, but philosophers and linguists traffic in universals. If slurs as such have a theoretical interest for us, it's to the degree that they exemplify a universal type, a class of words designed to perform a specialized kind of speech act or provisioned with a specialized semantic mechanism that's available in principle to speakers of any language in any cultural setting.

This isn't implausible on the face of things. The slur itself may be a culturally specific notion, but it has to rest on some more general ploy or device—it's not as if the possibility of using words to disparage groups didn't arise until modern English developed an app for them. And slurs do seem to have peculiarities of meaning and use which make them different from ordinary descriptive terms. They seem to play ducks and drakes with everyday assumptions about substitutivity; they elude direct contestation of their disparaging implications: and they

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[3] Among the philosophers who have addressed slurs in connection with metaethical issues are Copp (2001), Ridge (2006), Boisvert (2008), Schroeder (2009), and Hay (2011); those concerned chiefly with issues of extra-truth-conditional meaning include Hornsby (2001), Kaplan (2004), Saka (2007), Richard (2008), Williamson (2009), and Jeshion (forthcoming). Linguists such as Gutzmann (2013), Potts (2005, 2013) and Schlenker (2007) have also written about the semantics of slurs, but generally as an issue incidental to the analysis of (linguistic) expressives (an exception is May (2005)). Other linguists have studied slurs as a purely sociolinguistic phenomenon, particularly with regard to reclamation. That aside, though, this has been a relatively marginal topic for linguistics, like other natural-language phenomena that linguists have been content to leave to philosophers, such as proper names and natural-kind terms and the division of linguistic labor. The 2012 APA Pacific meetings consecrated six hours of sessions to slurs, almost certainly more time than the annual meeting of the Linguistic Society of America has devoted to the topic since the day when Bloch and Bloomfield were walking the earth.

can't always be neutralized by the quotation marks or other devices that we ordinarily use to hold the connotations of a expression at arm's length.

Still, I think these approaches are all fundamentally misconceived, for several related reasons. For one thing, people who abstract the slur to a universal type inevitably wind up building in what turn out to be culture-specific properties of the category—indeed, there doesn't seem to be a lot of awareness of just how much the particularities of slurs owe to local conditions. That has several unfortunate consequences. It leads to a focus on a relatively small number of prototypical slurs, slighting other words which exploit the same principles to create effects that are communicatively parallel to those of slurs but which don't necessarily raise the moral and social issues that surround the latter. It obscures some aspects of slurs that are marginal to their current sociopolitical interest but that figure centrally in their use. And those effects are compounded by an almost exclusive reliance on semantic mechanisms to account for the behavior and effects of these words. The theories vary, but almost all involve some kind of dedicated semantic machinery—slur-specific entailments, slur-specific conventional implicatures, or slur-specific expressive components—that has no obvious parallels with other descriptive terms. It's in virtue of such mechanisms that the meaning of the word itself can be made the bearer of the attitudes speakers use it to convey. The result is not just a semantics that is often rococo and sui generis, but a neglect of the social grounding of the phenomenon, as functional explanation is subordinated to formal modeling. Generally speaking, this literature isn't overburdened with philological detail.

I'll be arguing here not just that there's no existing semantic theory of slurs that accounts for the basic facts of their use, but that there couldn't be one. There are aspects of interpretation that can only be created by non-semantic means. One class of these involves implicatures that arise via the recognition of a transparent pretense, such as with most verbal irony—the implicature that rests on the hearer's recognition that the speaker's voice is displaced, that he's speaking the words of a more innocent self or someone else who has seen the world differently from how it plainly is: "He turned out to be a fine friend, didn't he?" I'll argue here that an analogous ventriloquism underlies slurs, where the speaker assumes the voice the words of a

community hostile to the target.[4] But once you try to build such an effect into the meaning of the word, you occlude the reasoning that gives rise to its significance and hence are at a loss to understand its function. Baldly put, semantic accounts of these words don't work, couldn't work, and wouldn't explain anything if they did.

This leaves me with the task of explaining, or explaining away, all the various features of slurs that have seemed to call for specialized semantic treatment. Most fundamentally, what makes them different from other descriptions—if *redskin* and *Indian* refer to the same group but differ in their connotations, what could account for the difference other than some arbitrary—which is to say, conventional—lexical feature? Here's one answer: the words might be prescribed by different conventions, not of the same language-variety, but of different ones, defined over distinct speech-communities. Imagine a dish that Southerners adore under one name and Northerners execrate under another; the two names are perfect synonyms, but the choice of one or the other word carries very different connotations. I'll be arguing here that this is basically what's going on with slurs and other words like them. The failure to see this is symptomatic of an endemic problem, a failure to take seriously the nature of conventions as they operate in the rough-and-tumble of sociolinguistic life. The properties of these words that have led people to overcomplicate their internal semantics are really reflexes of the social heterogeneities that underlie the linguistic conventions over which we build our lexicons. In effect, semantic approaches to slurs displace the contours of the sociolinguistic landscape onto the meanings of words themselves, with the result that we discern all sorts of semantic corrugations that aren't really there. Here's my thesis in a nutshell: racists don't use slurs because they're derogative; slurs are derogative because they're the words that racists use.

Slurs, Derogatives, and Prejudicials

The difficulties in characterizing slurs as a linguistic type emerge as soon as one tries to pin down the notion, and the terminological variation here can cloud things further. The definition offered by Mark Richard (2008) is as thoughtful as any:

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[4] One seventeenth-century word-list defined *ventriloquist* as "one that hath an evil spirit speaking in his belly," which is not far off as a description of the use of slurs. (OED)

A word is a slur when it is a conventional means to express strong negative attitudes towards members of a group, attitudes in some sense grounded in nothing more than membership in the group.

That's representative of the way most people define slurs, whether under that name or as "derogatives," or "pejoratives," in terms that involve no reference to culturally sensitive categories and make no appeal to subjective criteria. But for just those reasons it falls short of describing slurs as we think of them in this time and place. For one thing, it's too broad. Slurs as such aren't directed simply at "members of a group," but at members of certain kinds of groups, the ones defined by properties like race, religion, ethnicity, gender, and sexual orientation—the deep social fatalities that have been historically the focus of discrimination or group antagonisms. Names of other kinds of groups are exempted. It may sting to sit down at a Paris restaurant and overhear someone at the next table refer to your party *sotto voce* as *toutous*, a disparagement for tourists, but you wouldn't say that the word was a slur. Kayakers and sailors use *stinkpotter* to express their disdain for the owners of gas-powered craft, but not even a fanatic enthusiast of speedboats would deem that word a slur, either, or not in earnest, anyway.

Yet not every word that derogates the "right" sort of group counts as a slur, either. *Slur* is a hybrid term (what Bernard Williams called a thick term), which mixes categorization and attitude.[5] When someone says that W is a slur for the members of G, she conveys not just that W is a disparaging term for Gs but that the disparagement is unfair or unwarranted. That's what we'd say about *redskin* or *papist*, and most likely about many words that derogate political orientations, like *repug* and *libtard*. But what if the targets of a derogation have it coming? Is *clamhead* a slur for Scientologists? Wikipedia evenhandedly describes it as such, but most people reserve *slur* for words that give unfair or unreasonable offense to a group, and most people regard Scientology with some contempt. Or take *Ratzi*, the derogative term for the Nazis that Walter Winchell popularized during World War II. It satisfies Richard's definition, but not many people would describe it as a slur, or at least not anybody you'd want to have lunch with. Indeed, *slur* doesn't simply signal general disapproval of a term, but a more specific social judgment. The defining property of slurs—the one that justifies giving a distinct name to the

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[5] I prefer "hybrid" to "thick," both because it focuses on the semantic structure of these words and because the opposition to "thin" terms that don't describe but merely judge, if there are such, isn't relevant here.

class—is not just the idea that they're offensive, but the particular moral and political color of the offense they give.

At this point we could go in either of two ways. We could think like lexicographers and try to frame a definition that does justice to the word *slur* as it's actually used, which would preserve its immediate moral charge. But in that case we have to acknowledge that we're not dealing with a universal linguistic type. Natural language might provide some special apparatus for conveying derogation, but not just for conveying unfair derogation of certain kinds of social groups; semantically speaking, *redskin* is not going to look different from *Ratzi* or *stinkpotter*. Slurs as such, then, have no independent existence as a linguistic category, and whatever moral judgments we make about them are independent of their purely linguistic properties. This point hasn't always been appreciated; one sometimes sees people jumping from ethical to linguistic conclusions about the words. Hornsby (2001), for example, says that what she describes as derogatory words are "useless":

> Derogatory words are 'useless' for us. Some people have a use for them. But there is nothing that we want to say with them. Since there are other words that suit us better, we lose nothing by imposing for ourselves a blanket selection restriction on them, as it were.

If "derogatory word" here means roughly the same thing as *slur*, then Hornsby's claim could be defended, depending of course on who "we" are supposed to be, but it couldn't have any linguistic relevance. If "derogatory words" are simply words that disparage etc., then the claim is obviously false—surely one could find a use for a word like *facho* or *clamhead,* though in that case we'd probably demur from calling them slurs. And similarly for the claims that the assertions containing these words are essentially false (Hom 2008) or not truth-evaluable (Richard 2008), (Hedger 2012). There are no interesting linguistic conclusions to be drawn from any moral characterization of slurs, and vice-versa.

The alternative approach to defining the class is to say, "Okay, let's forget about slurs as such and focus on the specifically linguistic features of these words without reference to cultural specifics or subjective judgments." We'd need another term, then, one that comprehends not just *redskin* but *Ratzi* and *stinkpotter*. For that purpose we could draft *derogative,* and I hereby do so, but with the understanding that "derogation" is just a convenient label for an assortment of negative, unflattering, or insensitive attitudes that shade off in all directions, from contempt to ridicule to superiority to patronage—derogatives, we'll see, are no more a well-defined linguistic

class than slurs are. In fact there's no reason to stop there; we'll want to expand the class to cover all the words that convey an affective judgment of any tone or valence about the members of a category, subject to some other conditions that I'll come to in a moment. I'm going to use the term *prejudicial* for these, since it implies only that the speaker has a preconceived opinion of a category, either positive or negative.[6]

Like Richard and some others, I want to add another clause to the definition to stipulate that prejudicials require coextensive alternatives that don't convey the same evaluation. Here's how Richard puts this, only substituting *prejudicial* for his *slur*:

> Every [prejudicial], so far as I can tell, has or could have a "neutral counterpart" which co-classifies but is free of the [prejudicial's] evaluative dimension

Not everybody imposes this second requirement—it's more often mentioned by philosophers like Richard and Hornsby than by linguists. That may be because it's hard to think how one could work this stipulation into a semantic description, at least as linguists understand the notion—"possessing a neutral synonym" doesn't feel like a possible lexical feature. In fact this is a necessary stipulation, though it requires some revision. Start with "neutral." You wouldn't describe *pedophile* and *fascist* as "neutral" words, since they trail so many negative and disapproving connotations, but those are the only words available if you want to say something positive about either category. In that sense, *pedophile* is not a slur in the sense that *fag* is (though someone who calls you a pedophile may very well be slurring you in another sense of the word). In fact this criterion excludes a number of words that are highly pejorative, such as *Uncle Tom, Jewish American princess,* and *airhead*, which come under the distinct category of hybrid words, as we'll see.[7] Then too, the term "counterpart" seems to put the prejudicial and its denotational synonym at the same level, as if we were talking about the contrast between an evaluative term like *weirdo* and a more neutral item like *eccentric*, where there's no default

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[6] By the noun *prejudicial* I intend something more specific than a "prejudicial word" in the ordinary sense, which can be any word that characterizes something in a negative way, such as calling a subsidy to failing businesses a "bailout." Note also that a prejudicial in my sense can convey a positive attitude, as well.

[7] I don't think of these items as slurs, since they reproach their targets on the basis of their individual behavior, not (just) on the basis of their membership in a class; see below. But you may disagree, in which case you can argue that the account of the slur that I offer here isn't lexicographically complete.

expectation that one or the other term will be used. When someone uses a derogative, by contrast, there's the sense that she has engaged in a pointed departure from what would be the default term in that situation. Subject to clarification, then, let me say that a prejudicial is a marked alternative to a default synonym that doesn't convey the same evaluation.

By those two criteria, the class of words we're concerned with is quite broad. There are derogatives that disparage people for their occupations, like *flack* and *shyster*; for their avocations, like *toutou* and *stinkpotter*; for their political orientation, like *commie, libtard,* French *facho* for fascists, and "the Democrat Party"; and for their social status, like *pleb*. For that matter, there are derogative proper names, like *La La Land* for Los Angeles, Slick Willie for Bill Clinton, Faux News for Fox News, and a whole phonebook of soubriquets for Barack Obama, including Obumma, Oblowme, ObeyMe, Obozo—or simply Barack Hussein Obama, which makes pretty much the same point as the others do. Then there are approbative terms that convey respect or approval, such as *jurist*, *warfighter*, and *public servant*. There are prejudicials for things—derogatives like *death tax* and *Obamacare* (when it was first coined, anyway) and approbatives like *right-to-work* and *free enterprise*, each again with a default alternative. There are hypocoristics that convey affection, such as the Chicago Cubbies, dyslogisms like the Houston Lastros, euphemisms like *senior citizen*. To call a word a slur, then, is to say that it is a particular kind of derogative, which is itself a particular kind of prejudicial. But that's not to say that slurs inherit all their features and properties from those superordinate categories—some of these grow out of their particular social role and their interaction with a particular social setting.

Missing Meanings

What do prejudicials convey, and how do they convey it? Broadly speaking, there are two points of view on the first question, descriptive and expressive (taking the words in a linguistic rather than a metaethical sense): either the words characterize the members of a class or they simply indicate how the speaker feels about them. On the second question, pretty much everyone holds that whatever it is that the words convey, it's in virtue of their conventional linguistic meanings. The disagreement turns only on what manner of semantic mechanism does the conveying.

According to a descriptive theory, derogatives semantically convey negative stereotypes about the members of a class. As Dummett (1993 (1973)) says of the word *boche*, both German

nationality and cruelty are "involved in the very meaning of the word; neither could be severed without altering its meaning." This is a common and intuitive picture of things; as the psychologist Leo Rappaport (2005) wrote:

> Ethnic slurs serve as a kind of shorthand way of referring to the negative qualities associated with any particular group. They are quite specific. Hispanics might be called "spics" and Jews "kikes"; each term would stand for a specific c cluster of traits assumed to be typical of Hispanics and Jews.

Christopher Hom (2010) has worked this picture up in some detail. As he tells it, a slur implies both a stereotype and its consequences, so that

> …the epithet 'chink' 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.

This leads to the satisfying conclusion that to describe someone as a chink is to make a false assertion, because there are no chinks; the word has an empty extension. But it's a very strange sort of meaning for a word to have—with the possible exception of some specialized legal terminology, it's hard to think of any other descriptive word whose meaning has the structure "Should be A because of being B because of being C." And the fact is that when we call somebody a chink we don't necessarily imply any of these things about him. Even if that farrago of negative traits were implicit every time *chink* was used, the individual referred to might be entirely exempted from the charge—"He's a chink, yeah, but he's terrible at math, he's a careful driver and his collars are always dirty." Moreover, as several critics of Hom's view have observed, the derogation is present even when you say that so-and-so is not a chink or ask whether he's a chink, where no predication is involved. If the predication of a stereotype figured in this at all, then, it would apply only to the class to which the referent belongs—to say that "Yao is Chinese and the Chinese are typically devious, slanty-eyed…" and so on. And when we use the word to make an assertion about Chinese in general, as in "That dorm has a lot of chinks," we've said something like "That dorm has a lot of Chinese and the Chinese are typically devious, slanty-eyed…." But once again, that simply isn't the way we interpret assertions like these. As various people have observed, when someone says something about chinks, redskins, flacks, or whatever, we can't contest their remark by denying the aptness of the stereotype that the word putatively conveys, even when the assertion is made about the class itself:

1. a. Juan is a kraut.
   b. That's not true/That's false.
   b. #German people are not bad. (McCready 2010)

2. Two states just voted to allow fags to marry.
   a. That's wrong, three did.
   b. #That's wrong, they voted to allow family-oriented same-sex couples to marry.[8]

3. Do I need to hire a flack?
   a. No, you need a better publisher.
   b. #No, you need a frank, independent-minded publicist.

4. I hear the bill is supported by the libtards.
   a. No, most of the supporters are conservatives.
   b. #No, the supporters hold sound and compassionate progressive views.

5. Does the regime encourage free enterprise?
   a. No, they support socialism.
   b. # No, they encourage dog-eat-dog capitalism.

Potts (2005) describes this phenomenon by saying that the content of such words is "scopeless"; I prefer to say that it simply isn't there. When we hear somebody described with a prejudicial, that is, we don't interpret the speaker as having predicated anything about either him or the class he belongs to over and above his membership in it.

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[8] I'm excluding here cases of what Horn (1985) describes as metalinguistic negation, where the speaker contests the appropriateness of someone's use of a term. He gives examples like "I beg your pardon: Lee isn't an 'uppity nigger' — she's a strong, vibrant black woman." The intuition that sentences like "He's not a chink, he's Chinese" involve metalinguistic negation is supported by other observations. For example, Horn observes that metalinguistic negation is disfavored when the negation is expressed by "it is not true that" or "it's not the case that":

　?*It's not the case that the dog SHAT on the carpet—he DEFECATED on it.

Note that this holds as well for the evaluative import of derogatives, with the inclusion of "in fact" reinforcing the point:

　It's not the case that John is a chink; (in fact) he's Japanese.
　??It's not the case that John is a chink; (in fact) he's terrible at math and his collars are always dirty.

Similarly, McCawley (1991) observed that some "echoes" that express strong disagreement can't be used metalinguistically:

　In a pig's eye we had intercourse, we never so much as kissed/?*we fucked!
　In a pig's eye John's a redskin! He's from Finland/?*He's teetotal, mild-tempered and articulate.
　(Can only mean John is not an American Indian)

There are formal work-arounds that Hom could introduce here, for example by giving *chink* a logical form in which the descriptive content of the word took wide scope; i.e. "John is not a chink" would come out as "John is not Chinese and all Chinese are such-and-such."[9] But leaving aside the ad hoc feel of that analysis, we'd be left wondering why a sentence with wide-scope negation like "It's false that John is not a chink" wouldn't come out as true if John isn't Chinese but false that the Chinese are devious and the rest.

One solution to that difficulty is to bury the stereotype associated with a derogative in a conventional implicature, as a number of people have proposed. This would avoid some of the problems I've mentioned so far and might be set up so as to explain why an utterance of "Harry is a chink" doesn't necessarily imply that Harry himself is devious: an utterance of *chink* might conventionally implicate only that the Chinese are *generically* devious.

One can understand the motivation here. Conversational implicature is a mechanism designed to accommodate cases where a term has two dimensions to its meaning, so that its application can be right in one way and wrong in another: "Anna is rich but a Democrat" might make a true statement about Anna's wealth and political allegiance yet fall afoul of its implication that there is something unexpected about the connection between the two. In that regard, there's an apparent parallel to "Jules is a redskin," if you take that sentence to assert truthfully that Jules is an American Indian but imply wrongly that he is savage or contemptible. But while that may be the net conversational effect of such utterances, these words are very different from the items for which conventional implicatures were originally proposed. There are linguistic devices whose function requires a special kind of semantic treatment—discourse markers like *well*, connectives like *but,* and certain constructions like *wh-* exclamations and appositives. But why here, with what look for all the world like ordinary descriptive terms? What could it be about the word *redskin* that makes it semantically more like *but* than like *Indian*—not just in having a different meaning, but a totally different *kind* of meaning? Is there any other descriptive term with a meaning remotely like this—might we expect to encounter such a lexical meaning in words used as names for pets, exotic cocktails, or criminal argot? If not, why not— what do these quirks of meaning and use have to do with these particular words and the practices

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[9] I owe this suggestion to Adam Simon.

that surround them? In fact I'll be arguing here that we don't have to treat these words as anything other than the descriptive terms that by all appearances they are.

In any event, this account fails empirically. The stereotype associated with the category denoted by a prejudicial isn't part of the word's meaning in any guise. Here's another way to make this point: instead of asking whether these ascriptions can be directly contested, let's ask when they can be informatively predicated of the term. Suppose cruelty was actually inherent in the linguistic meaning of *boche*, whether as descriptive content, a presupposition, or a conventional implicature. Then the very fact of using the word would introduce the assumption that Germans are cruel into the conversational ground. But in that case, why doesn't an assertion of "The boche are cruel" strike us as conversationally tautological? And similarly for "Commies are devious"—or "godless," or "fanatical," or "ruthless," or whatever you take the stereotypically invidious traits of communists to be—which a militant anti-communist wouldn't find so redundant as to not need saying. Someone who speaks about free enterprise presumably endorses the claim that market capitalism is the fairest and most productive economic system, and someone who refers to the estate tax as the death tax implies that he believes that it's an unfair exaction. But we don't sense a tautology when someone says, "Free enterprise is the most equitable economic system" or "The death tax is unfair." (Indeed, Nexis turns up 1099 news articles in which "death tax" occurs within three words of "unfair," virtually all of them uttered by people who believed they were saying something informative.) Some of those traits may well be hovering in the background when you use a prejudicial, but they aren't part of the semantics of the word.[10]

Prejudicials and Prejudice

These arguments suffice to show that descriptive semantic accounts of prejudicials can't explain their use, even at the expedient of introducing new and more intricate machinery to get them to come out right. By themselves, though, they don't tell us why such accounts *couldn't* be right. People do unquestionably make use of stereotypes about social groups, and while the word *stereotype* is generally used now only in a disparaging way, stereotypes are among the cognitive

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[10] As we'll see, in this way prejudicials are different from true hybrids, where we do evoke a *Duh!* reaction when we independently predicate their evaluative components of them, as in "Valor is commendable," "Bullies aren't nice," "Fleecing someone is unfair."

shortcuts that are necessary to the way people makes sense of the social world. So why couldn't such stereotypes be part of the meanings of slurs and other prejudicials?

Return to the descriptivist picture of these words. Earl sees a Chinese family moving in next door says to his wife, "The neighborhood's filling up with chinks." On the descriptive view, Earl has committed himself by that utterance to saying or conventionally implicating that the new residents share (or tend to share) a number of unwelcome traits in virtue of their ethnicity. As Hom tells the story, whether Earl knows it or not, his use of *chink* commits him to the proposition that his neighbors are increasingly people who "ought to be subject to higher college admissions standards, and ought to be subject to exclusion from advancement to managerial positions, and…, all because of being slanty-eyed, and devious, and good-at-laundering, and …, all because of being Chinese." But while we can assume that Earl holds Chinese people in contempt, it's unlikely that either he or his wife had in mind such an extensive and detailed bill of particulars about them, or was even aware of most of it. How could all of those attributes work themselves into the meaning of his utterance without passing through his consciousness on the way? To get all these properties into play, Hom appeals to what he calls "combinatorial externalism": really, he says, the meaning of *chink* is determined not by Earl's state of mind, but by the "social institutions of racism," which pervade every utterance of the word with all the anti-Chinese prejudices that are in circulation. It's hard to know what means—do we have to consult a historian of racism to find out what Earl really said, and would even he agree that Earl is semantically, and morally, responsible for endorsing a view on Chinese college admission standards that Earl has never given a thought to? What could possible count as evidence for that conclusion?

So while some kind of externalist story is required here, it's a mistake to draw a parallel with the familiar narratives about lemons and elms that mentions of externalism typically bring to mind. Those are stories about fixing the reference of a term: we collectively assign authority to various experts to tell us what our utterances of *dogwood*, *sonata form*, and *quantitative easing* refer to, and then we can succeed in referring with the terms whether or not we can individually pick out the things they denote. Ignorance of the meaning is no excuse. If your gardener promises you a rose garden and plants peonies instead, he can't get off the hook by saying, "They all look the same to me."

But speakers who use *wop* or *wetback* haven't collectively agreed to defer to experts who have the job of determining on their behalf what opinions or descriptions they convey when use the words. If that were how things worked, after all, you couldn't hold people morally responsible for their utterances, nor would the words be very effective as insults. In fact, with relatively rare exceptions, people are aware that the slurs they use are slurs and at least roughly aware of what their impact is—and when they're not, we tend to let them at least partly off the moral hook, provided there's a reasonable explanation for their ignorance. [11]

Still, it's clear that prejudicials inherit their effects from the larger social world. They can't suggest any attitudes or beliefs that aren't already out there, whatever the speaker's state of mind. Take a (literal) case in point. Some years ago I volunteered to serve as an expert witness for a group of well-known American Indians who had brought a petition in the Patent and Trademark Office to cancel the mark of the Washington Redskins on the grounds that the Lanham Act doesn't permit the registration of marks that are disparaging. We assembled an extensive dossier of evidence to show that the term had been used disparagingly since the early nineteenth century, and that it was still used in that way back in 1965 when the Redskins mark was originally registered. In response, the team engaged a linguist of their own who contended that *redskin* was merely a "robust informal synonym" for American Indians. In any event, the team said, disparagement requires intention on the part of the speaker, insisting that the Redskins' "intent in adopting the team name was entirely positive." But even if that was true, as the court noted, it was irrelevant to what the team's use of the word conveyed: when a term is commonly understood to index a certain social attitude, the speaker doesn't have any leeway to make personal revisions in it (ironic reappropriation aside). It was the team's business, the court noted, to know what the word conveyed. In fact I suggested at my trial deposition, half seriously,

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[11] People do sometimes use derogatives without being aware of their implications. Someone might say "She got herself a Jew lawyer" without realizing that the noun *Jew* is offensive when used as an attributive modifier. Or people may use an older name for a group unaware that it has acquired disparaging connotations. Such speakers obviously require polite but firm correction. But while their utterances may have genuinely given offense, if their intentions were innocent they aren't necessarily morally responsible for those implications, the way that botanically challenged gardener can be legally responsible for planting the wrong flowers. Still, there are limits to when you can reasonably plead ignorance: an adult American who uses *nigger* in genuine unawareness of its associations can certainly be taxed for hanging out with the wrong crowd.

that the petitioners shouldn't need to produce any evidence for their claim, since the argument could be made on *prima facie* grounds. Inasmuch as *redskin* had been used by white Americans from the time of Fenimore Cooper up to the mid-twentieth century, what attitudes *could* it have conveyed other than disparaging or condescending ones? What else was out there?

So suppose we took a middle ground, and say only that Earl's utterance conveys a set of traits that most people commonly associate with the Chinese—think of this as the cluster theory of stereotypes. Calling someone a chink, on that account, might not convey anything about college admissions standards, but would imply something about deviousness or clannishness. Even in that case, though, all we would require of the term is that it somehow get us to a certain cluster of traits; it doesn't have to entail them all by itself. But semantic approaches wind up doing just that. Independently existing stereotypes would have to somehow replicate themselves, redundantly, in the semantic gene plasm of a derogative name for the group. And in that case, we'd be left with the puzzle of why derogatives are always derogative. After all, racial stereotypes may be generally deplorable, but they're rarely categorically negative—they're typically compounded of contrasting or inconsistent traits. As the sociologist Ali Rattansi (2007) observes:

> Stereotypes… reveal contradiction and ambivalence rather than completely invariable hostility or admiration toward other groups… Attitudes toward Asians in Europe and the US, for instance, reveal admiration for supposed community unity, thrift, ambition, hard work, respect for education, and 'family values,' but also hostility for insularity, suspicion regarding their loyalties, to the Western nation-states in which they have come to live, and a sense of superiority toward their more 'backward' cultures…"

The positive traits of these stereotypes are the more genial manifestations of the conflicted racial attitudes that also shape the negative ones. (That point eluded the management of the Washington Redskins when they insisted with Fenimorian condescension that their mark was a respectful tribute to American Indians' courage and tenacity.) But *chink* doesn't convey any ambivalence about the Chinese; as Jeshion (forthcoming) notes, the word is "unequivocally and exclusively contemptuous." One might argue that the slur semantically selects only the negative features of the stereotype. But just about any feature of a stereotype can be regarded as positive or negative on a given occasion. On Monday it's "You have to give it to the chinks; they work hard"; on Tuesday it's "No wonder those damn chinks all get A's—they don't do anything but study until two in the morning." Whatever ethnic traits a given utterance of the word *chink* brings

to mind, if any, are just those that are contextually consistent with an *antecedent* attitude of condescension or contempt.

The attitude comes first. To suggest that invidious stereotypes are the source of bigotry is credit the bigot with a weirdly misplaced rationality, as if his antipathies were sound logical conclusions drawn from what happen to be false premises. But racism, anti-Semitism, homophobia, and xenophobia are fundamentally rooted in the basic fact of alterity rather than the stereotypes that people cite to justify or rationalize the attitude—of contempt, loathing, fear, or condescension, as the case may be.[12] As Walter Lippmann wrote in *Public Opinion*, the 1922 book that introduced the notion of the stereotype into American intellectual discourse, "[T]he perfect stereotype…precedes the use of reason; is a form of perception, imposes a certain character on the data of our senses before the data reach the intelligence."

That's why those stereotypes can vary from one person to another or change over time without dramatically shifting the significance of a slur. At one time or another *kike* has conjured up images of Jews as Christ-killers, as money-grubbing tradesmen, as clannish and superior, as conspiratorial international bankers, as deviates and radicals, as Stalin's "rootless cosmopolitans," and even, in the 1930's, as possessing a duplicitous genius for basketball. But it isn't as if the word has had seven or nine or however many meanings, or as if there's any semantic misunderstanding between the speaker who denounces kikes with Abbie Hoffman in mind and the listener who agrees with him while thinking of George Soros. The animus transcends the various pretexts we give for it. Hornsby (2001) puts this point nicely:

> Racist speakers no more convey specific bits of ideology whenever they use racist words than our imagined British speaker imputes barbarity to every German person she described with 'Boche'. If speakers' involvement with the ideology went as deep as it would need to in order to be implicit in their very use of words, then common understandings would be difficult to preserve.

True, certain derogatives may bring specific stereotypes to mind. Sometimes the stereotype is suggested by the name itself, particularly when it's derived from a description—

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[12] As often as not, of course, group stereotypes have some grounding in fact. On occasion, indeed, they may provide a valid justification for conceiving a negative attitude toward the group and possibly for a prejudicial term that expresses it, though in that case it won't be considered a slur (think *facho*, for example). Even then, though, the stereotype figures only as the perhaps post-hoc justification for the attitude the term expresses, not as part of what it conveys.

Slick Willie, *fairy*, *beaner* for Mexicans or Holy Roller for Pentecostals.[13] Or sometimes the stereotype is drawn from the historical context in which the term emerged. The connection of *boche* to cruelty, for those who still retain any feel for the word, reflects its origin in the slang of World War I Tommies, who borrowed it from the French *poilus*. The terms that soldiers apply to the enemy naturally bring to mind his cruelty and inhumanity, rather, say, than his bombastic music or turgid scholarship; that's the theme historically evoked by army slang like *jerry, nip, jap, gook*, and *dink*. Even then, though, the stereotype functions to justify or frame a particular affective attitude: as used by a Tommy, *boche* didn't presuppose simply that the Germans were cruel, but that that was why they were contemptible to the point of meriting killing. And when there are multiple slurs for a single group, they're often distinguished chiefly by the affective attitudes they suggest, rather than by the stereotypes that they convey. Someone who wants to impute laziness to blacks or tightfistedness to Jews can choose pretty much any slur for the group—on the web, *kike*, *jewboy* and *yid* have almost exactly the same probability of being modified by *greedy*. It can happen that two words for a group differ chiefly in assigning dramatically different evaluations to the same stereotypical traits. *Spade*, for example, was the term of choice for blacks among mid-century bopsters and hipsters and later among the hippies. A flier by the counterculture writer and editor Chester Anderson that was circulated in San Francisco's Haight in 1967 proclaimed: "The spades, dear my brothers [sic], are our spiritual fathers…. They gave us jazz & grass & rock & roll …if it weren't for the spades we would all have short hair, neat suits, glazed eyes, steady jobs, and gastric ulcers." (Peck 1985) Like other prejudicials for blacks, this use of *spade* evoked the familiar stereotypes of indolence, insouciance and drug-use, but in a tone of sentimentalized admiration rather than out-and-out contempt.

In a related way, we want to bear in mind that slurs convey not just certain attitudes towards the group they denote but the self-conception of the group that uses them. This function of slurs has been almost wholly ignored in the philosophical and linguistic literature, which is

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[13] Perhaps not all of these are genuine prejudicials. When the affect or stereotype that a term invokes can be deduced entirely from its descriptive meaning, no further mechanism is required. In that sense the relatively transparent *death tax* is arguably in a different class from *free enterprise*, which is no longer as compositionally obvious as it was in 1890 when Albert Marshall coined it as a replacement for *capitalism*. I could go either way on this one.

focused on the use of the words to disparage and injure their targets, making allowances only for their reclaimed use by those they target.[14] But only the tiniest proportion of the utterances of these words are addressed to members of the group they target or are used as direct insults. They're far more commonly exchanged between people who share, or make as if to share, the attitudes they convey—to create solidarity in a shared sense of resentment or superiority, to underscore the normative values of the group, to distinguish themselves from genteel speakers who are too fastidious to use the words, or simply out of a schoolyard pleasure in complicit naughtiness. (In this regard, too, slurs resemble vulgar descriptions like *asshole*.) In fact the tonal differences among slurs for the same group very often have as much or more to do with the distinct self-conceptions they presuppose than with what they convey about their targets. The fact that someone chooses to refer to blacks as spades rather than as jungle bunnies, spooks, niggers or coons tells us less about what traits he ascribes to blacks than about how he sees himself and his listeners.

But to say that derogatives convey attitudes rather than descriptions doesn't necessarily mean their expressive force is built into their conventional meanings, as expressivists usually assume. In fact, many of the same arguments that make a semantic treatment problematic for the descriptive view create problems for expressivist views, as well. The attitudes evoked by prejudicials, like the stereotypes they can bring to mind, have to be independently out there, and for that reason it's unnecessary to reproduce them in the semantics of the term. A speaker's use of a slur can't convey contempt unless the group it targets is already regarded contemptuously. In some contexts, in fact, describing someone with the default or neutral name for the group he belongs to will be sufficient to evoke an ambient derogatory attitude, particularly when his membership in the group has no independent conversational relevance: "She's been seeing a

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[14] An exception is Miščević (2011), writing in response to Richard's definition of a slur as "a device made to denigrate, abuse, intimidate, and show contempt." Miščević agrees that that definition fits the "second-person uses" of slurs, but adds, "nowadays, 3rd person uses [of slurs] seem at least as common as 2nd person ones. People have become more cautious, the use pejoratives behind the back of the targets, so the intended perlocutionary effect cannot be directly to offend.… [the] perlocutory intentions" in this case have to do with eliciting solidarity against the target." Actually, third-person uses of slurs are probably hundreds of times more frequent than their uses in direct address, and the chief purpose of these is not always to elicit "solidarity against the target," as we will see.

black guy from another high school"; "I had a gay kid come in to whine about his grade the other day." Slurs add to that, of course, but not by contributing any novel attitudes. What they do, rather, is to make the speaker's attitude explicit and specific, carving out a particular feeling-tone from among the various tunes in circulation.

Moreover, the feeling-tones that these words convey—the affective attitude toward their targets and its connection to the social identity of their users—are generally much too complex and socially embedded to be rendered in meaning-formulas like "despicable because Indian" or "Jewish and used to refer to Jews with hatred or hostility," which reflect the simplistic picture of the word's affect that's implicit in the word *slur* itself. How should one describe the affect associated with the hipster's *spade*, for example? It implies the hipster's self-conception as the "White Negro," the title of Norman Mailer's famous essay, and the attachment to jazz, marijuana, and "cool," which the hipsters can take credit for introducing into the mainstream cultural discourse. The word certainly wasn't used contemptuously—Ken Kesey described it as a "term of endearment," and Chester Anderson, as I noted, went so far as to describe spades as "our spiritual fathers." But the term was also dehumanizing and obtuse; as one black critic described it, "those fay cats… don't want us to be Uncle Toms, but they still want us to be spooks. They don't really dig us as a people; they just dig us for our music and our pot." (Foreman 1998) Those passages suggest the range of complex and conflicted attitudes at work here. However you describe the evaluation implicit in *spade*—as derogative, condescending, romanticized, or simply a slur—the label won't begin to capture the word's implications or affective force—and here, as often, the intended affect ("a term of endearment") isn't necessarily what the word conveys to a neutral listener. Like most of the words that do the heavy lifting in the social world, *spade* is what Empson called a "compacted doctrine," which stands in for a dense and brindled chunk of lived reality. That doesn't mean that the attitude expressed by *spade* is descriptively ineffable, but like the other complex keywords that social historians and ethnographers wrestle with, it isn't easy to eff. The most we can expect the lexical meaning of the word itself to do is to index the sociohistorical context in which the attitudes and identity of the word's speakers are formed, and whose point of view the speaker assumes in using the word. The externalism of prejudicials isn't grounded in deference but identification.

There's more to it than that; later on I'll argue below that a semantic convention by itself can't turn a word into a display of attitude, an "expressive" in the strong sense of the term, as slurs have to be in order to achieve certain of their social effects. But at this point I want to turn to explaining how all these effects could arise without the intervention of semantics—why, that is, I say that slurs aren't special.

Meaning and Metadata

What exactly do we need to know about the linguistic meaning of a derogative in order to use or understand it? For starters, we might look at how standard dictionaries deal with these items:

> **redskin** *usually offensive* American Indian (Merriam-Webster)
>
> **redskin** *dated, offensive***.** An American Indian. (Oxford American)
>
> **redskin** *Slang (often disparaging and offensive)* A North American Indian. (Random House)

These entries make no mention of any properties that *redskin* imputes to its referents; they don't say anything about redskins being savage, stupid, inarticulate or alcoholic. They simply attach a label like "disparaging" or "offensive" to the entry—not as part of its meaning, but as a kind of lexical metadata. Labels like these provide information of various kinds. They can indicate a word's geographical or social provenance (*Southern, nonstandard*), its currency (*rare, archaic*), the kind of discourse it's associated with (*formal, slang*), the field it's used in (*bot*., *ling*.), or its typical effect or reception (*disparaging*, *humorous*), among other things.

Such metadata features are obviously part of our knowledge *about* a word, but they don't belong to its conventional meaning. The linguistic conventions that govern the meanings of *anon* and *alas* don't specify that they're archaic, and the conventional meaning of *asshole* doesn't specify that it's vulgar. It is not a matter of semantic convention that *ain't* is associated with the English of low-status or working-class speakers (it is conventional among certain groups of speakers, often low-status, to use the word, but that's not the same thing).[15] But these features

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[15] People frequently say things like "*redskin* has a disparaging meaning," in the same way they might say "*bloviate* has a jocular meaning," using "meaning" to refer simply to what one expects a dictionary to say about the word or what one has to know about the word in order to use it appropriately. And one might ask whether it isn't simply hair-splitting to ask whether such features count as metadata or semantic content. But as we'll see, conventionality in the narrow sense is precisely the property we want to focus

can give rise to conversational implicatures all the same. Tom Wasow once pointed me to an article in the *Chronicle of Higher Education* that quoted a dean at an Eastern university: "Any junior scholar who stresses teaching at the expense of research ain't going to get tenure." In the dean's mouth, the use of the demotic *ain't* rather than *isn't* was a pointed choice, implying that his conclusion wasn't based on expert knowledge or a research survey—as if to say, "You don't need an advanced degree to see that; it's obvious to anyone with an ounce of sense." (That's shy *ain't* is commonly used in the sayings we use to express nitty-gritty verities, such as "If it ain't broke don't fix it" and "It ain't over till the fat lady sings.") And while "Alas, the Warriors lost" conveys an arch or ironic tone that isn't present with "Shit, the Warriors lost," the difference isn't narrowly semantic—it follows from choosing an archaic literary word rather than a vulgar colloquialism to express one's disappointment.

These are familiar conversational moves, and there's a temptation to think of them as having been folded into the semantics of the expressions. It's easy for philosophers and linguists to slip from observing that a practice is conventional in the loose sense of the term—that it's customary or routine—to concluding that it must be conventional in the narrower sense, prescribed by an arbitrary rule. One might conclude, for example, that *alas* has become merely a conventional signifier of ironized lamentation. But it is more accurate to say that the word is regarded as an archaism, like *anon* and *perchance*, and that such words are used conventionally—in the loose sense—when we want to evoke some bygone sensibility for various reasons, such as to color the expression of an attitude or emotion with literary distance. This is where the ventriloquism comes into play: *alas* can only convey what it does because it's what we think people *used to* say in the elastic literary past of Walter Scott and Shakespeare. (I say "what *we think* people used to say" because the label *archaic* describes the contemporary view of a word, unlike *obsolete*, which applies to its actual history. What matters with these words, as with slurs, we'll see, is not where they come from but only how we conceive of their provenance.)[16]

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on when it comes to explaining the social grounding that slurs and other terms exploit to achieve their effects.

[16] Words like these can retain their archaic flavor for centuries without becoming obsolete. In his 1776 *Philosophy of Grammar*, George Campbell counseled against using words that have fallen out of use, including items such as *behest* and *anon*, except "when they serve to add the venerable air of antiquity to a narrative." *Alas* has been an archaism since Victorian times, if not earlier.

If *alas* no longer had an archaic character—if it were merely a formal word of modern English like *lamentable*—it couldn't evoke the same sensibilities; and if its status as an archaism is sufficient to evoke those sensibilities all by itself, there's nothing arbitrary about the effect that would require further conventionalization. In short, these ventriloquistic effects defy semanticization, a point I'm going to keep coming back to.

The evaluations associated with prejudicials are signaled by another sort of metadata, a kind of implicit indication of provenance. Here's an illustration of the principle: the week after the Monica Lewinsky story broke, the *New York Times* Week in Review section ran its story about it under a picture of the White House at night, which was headed "Scandale." I asked an editor at the section why they felt the need to put that final *e* on the word. He said, "Oh, that's so readers will know it's about sex and not money." Now most Americans would assume, correctly as it happens, that French *scandale* and English *scandal* are close synonyms, so that when Frenchmen say *Quel scandale!* they express the very same thought that we would express with "What a scandal!" The added implications of using the French word in an English context don't arise from a meaning difference but from a familiar cultural stereotype of the French. Ventriloquism again—when someone expresses himself this way in an Anglophone context, he's impersonating a Frenchman, or more accurately, the popular image of a Frenchman, so as to convey the impression that he regards the affair with an attitude of Gallic worldliness. This is the same ploy that has led English-speakers in the past to plunder the French lexicon for items like *risqué*, *voyeur*, *coquette* and *ménage à trois*, terms that permit us to talk about naughty things with a more urbane tolerance than our Anglo-Saxon attitudes typically countenance. And even though those words have been used in English-language contexts since the nineteenth century, it's notable that over all that time we've retained the orthographic or phonetic features that mark them as conspicuously alien, in the same way we've preserved *anon* as an archaism for centuries. It's true that we sometimes invest the words with more explicitly sexual meanings than the French themselves do—in French, to say something is *risqué* doesn't necessarily mean it's naughty, and a *ménage à trois* isn't really a threesome. But then this isn't about the French and their language as they actually are but about the French as we fancy them to be.

Lexical Conventions and Their Domains

Of course prejudicials aren't generally foreign words, but the principle is the same: the words derive their significance and force from the attitudes we associate with the people who use them. By itself, that's not exactly a novel insight. Hornsby says, "About derogatory words… one finds oneself saying that negative or hostile attitudes of *their users* have rubbed off onto them" (my italics). Blackburn (1984) says of *boche* that the word "belongs to people who accept a certain attitude—that being a German is enough to make someone a fit object of derision." But the implications of those observations haven't been pursued. What exactly does it mean to say that a derogative "belongs to" certain people? Let's say that it means pretty much the same thing that it means when we say that the word *scandale* belongs to the French; that is, that that is the conventional descriptive term for Xs among the members of certain group, whose users have, or are believed to have, decided attitudes about Xs.

The lexicon has a sociolinguistic structure, as well as a semantic and morphological one: the words we use are drawn from the lexical conventions of various cross-cutting communities and discourses, only some of which are actually in some sense "ours." At a first pass, we can think of a lexical convention as a rule for using a word that a certain group of people conforms to because they collectively believe it answers to their common communicative interests. Then we can describe the domain of a convention simply as the social projection of that interest, the group of people who recognize a distinct common stake in having a distinct word for such-and-such a thing.[17] Sometimes that's because the word denotes a category the members of the group have a

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[17] I'm interested here only in lexical conventions, and I take it that for this much is uncontroversial. (It isn't in any way inconsistent with the facts of semantic specialization and the division of linguistic labor, though those cases won't figure here.) I leave it open how conventions of this sort are related to conventions in the more global sense, as originally developed by Lewis, where "a population P uses a language £ is a convention of truthfulness and trust in £." (Lewis 1975) That definition has been revised in numerous ways, but always presuming the conception of a language as a general means for expressing propositions. (Lewis 1975 touches sketchily on internal linguistic heterogeneity, but not so as to affect the general point.) The implicit, and for those purposes, justified idealization in these treatments is that the speakers of a language want to be able to talk to each other about everything and anything. Whereas when we talk about lexical conventions it's in order to acknowledge that things are more complicated: our interest in coordinating our usage with others depends on what we're talking about. Americans and Englishmen have no overriding interest being able to talk to each other about vegetables, which is why

distinct interest in individuating—*emotivism* for philosophers, *ergativity* for linguists, *triple net* in commercial real estate. Or sometimes it's just because the members of a group want to suggest they have their own interest in defining a particular category, whether it's really necessary or not. Adolescents coin their own words for friends or intimates, not because efficient reference demands it—in conversation with adults, they resignedly fall back on the standard terms—but because it implies a special conception of those relationships and hence signals a distinct social identity. In either case, we want to distinguish between the people who perceive themselves as sharing those common interests, that is, the parties to the conventions, and the people who simply conform to the convention deferentially on some occasions. I can talk about a triple-net lease, but only out of deference to the way real estate investors use the word. I'm even free to say I've been chillin' with my mains, but who am I kidding? Another way of saying this is that there's nothing the nonparties to a convention can say or do that will alter its form, in the same way that my use or misuse of the French subjunctive isn't going to have any effect on the way French people use it. But over time, of course, a convention can be extended to a broader community, sometimes in virtue of a more widespread acknowledgement of the interest it answers to, often accompanied a reinterpretation of that interest—in which case the meaning of the word may change, as well. There are numerous variations on this theme.[18]

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nobody cares that the former say *rutabaga* and the latter say *swede*, and Americans in different regions don't feel the need to use the same words to refer to soft drinks, but English-speakers as a collective whole do seem to wind up coordinating their usage of words like *vanity* or *dissolution*—words for which the usage of the writers of one nation can be establish valid precedents for writers of the others. A language, in reality, is "a sprawling mass of crisscrossing, overlapping conventions," as Milliken (2005) puts it in another context. That description is apt but punts as I am doing on the central question of how these sprawling masses of conventions assemble themselves into proper languages—where exactly does English come into this?

[18] The nativization of a foreign word is a familiar case; so too is the spread of a slang word from a small subculture to the wider community, to the point where the wider community is no longer simply borrowing it but assumes "ownership" of it, along with the right to redefine it—at which point, of course the subcommunity in which it originated is likely to drop it. Or in a very different kind of case, the language of a specialized discipline may be adopted by the general population on the assumption they are borrowing a technical term and hence deferring to the convention of a narrow community, even as they reshape it to their own ends—think of the way *narcissism* is used in public life.

I'm using "group" in a very general way. The social projection of a convention needn't necessarily be an independently constituted "robust" social type—New Yorkers, philosophers, Jewish Americans, inner-city adolescents, real-estate brokers, sailing enthusiasts. Conventions can also be defined relative to a register, medium, or style. There are conventions that apply only in formal address, in written language, in meetings, and so on. Or the domain of a lexical convention can correspond simply to the self-conscious social extension of certain set of beliefs or attitudes, which themselves can sometimes be imputed by the existence of the word itself. That is, you could say that the social projection of the convention for using w to denote A is just whatever group is such that its members recognize a common interest in having a distinct common word for A. That definition isn't necessarily circular or uninformative. It's enough to say that the social projection of the convention for using *free enterprise* is the group of people who perceive a common interest in having a distinct approbative name for market capitalism, which by itself actually tells us quite a bit about them. But in cases like that we might better think of the projection of the convention as the participants in a certain discourse, rather than as a speech-community—say the same discourse whose participants refer to the wealthy as "job creators." If you did the sociology you might discover that those people tend to be Republicans, *Wall Street Journal* subscribers, or whatever. But it's the discourse that's matters, because however you describe its participants, they don't use the terms on all occasions. Think of the discourse of modern corporate life, where there are contexts in which people are expected to refer to their goals as missions and their concerns as passions. But not even human resources managers use that language when they're talking about their personal goals for themselves and their families.

With this in mind, we can think of the individual speaker's conception of the lexicon as resembling the dictionary entries I mentioned earlier, with words tagged with a pointer to the social domain whose conventions prescribe their use. Of course, actual dictionaries tag only those metadata features of words that depart from certain norms: they mark words as substandard but not standard, as regional but not national, as archaic but not current, and so on. That approach is consistent with our default interpretation of the metalanguage of the dictionary, and it's not an unreasonable picture of the individual's internalized lexicon, either: we assign a marked status only to word that seem to be alternatives to an implicit default. But the defaults

aren't semantically or socially "neutral," no more than Standard English is something distinct in kind from other English dialects.[19]

Relative to a speech situation, we can talk about the default convention for referring to A as the one that would ordinarily determine which word participants should use, subject to implicitly negotiated norms (of which more below). It may be a convention to which the participants in the exchange are themselves parties, or to which one is a party, or which belongs to the practices of some other group. If the participants belong to no group that has a word for A, they may be obliged to defer to the convention of some other group that does, for example when A is a technical notion or a foreign food. On occasion, though, we make a point of flouting or opting out of the default convention for referring to A in favor of some other convention. One reason for doing that is to claim or simulate membership in another group whose members have an alternative attitude toward A. We can think of this as a case of what Daniel Harris (2013) calls an "affiliatory" speech act, which claims an affiliation with a particular group. Sometimes the object is to suggest an affinity with a group one doesn't belong to, as when white teenagers adopt hip hop slang in order to intimate that they are down with the bros. Sometimes it's to signal solidarity with the fellow members of a group or to distance oneself from the group whose norms would ordinarily establish the conventions that should govern the speech situation—for example when an African American academic injects inner-city slang into a formal discourse when the default convention would prescribe a Standard English word. And sometimes it's to insult or offend someone by evoking a discourse in which he's held in contempt. In an appropriate context, an Anglophone anti-Semite can disparage Jews simply by using the German word for Jew, without actually presenting himself as being a German.

The implications of these choices arise independently of the lexical meanings of these words. When you refer to *free enterprise* you normally affiliate yourself with the attitudes that are presupposed in its characteristic discourse, whether you're a party to the convention that governs it or not. (Obama uses the phrase sometimes, but not with a native-speaker accent.) But

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[19] What matters from the standpoint of individual speech acts is the speaker and hearer's conception of the lexicon and of the social groups or identities associated with the use of particular words. Those conception may be, and indeed, often are at odds with the picture than an omniscient observer might come up with. This leads to important tensions which I won't go into here.

there's nothing in the meaning of the phrase that's explicitly approving of capitalism or that expresses any evaluation at all. It's not a hybrid term like *nanny state* or *fat cat*. Rather it's just the neutral descriptive name for free-market capitalism in the ideological discourse of people who hold that the capitalist system is a bully idea. That's why the stereotype associated with the word isn't accessible to contestation or negation, and why someone can assert that free enterprise is the fairest and most productive economic system without expressing an obvious tautology. By way of analogy, think of one cardinal saying to another that the Holy Mother Church is the one true religion. His colleague doesn't take him as having asserted a tautology. Even though anyone who describes Catholicism in earnest as the Holy Mother Church is a good bet to believe in the truth of the faith, you wouldn't want to say that that proposition is entailed by the meaning of the phrase.

From Description to Derogation

Very often, though, something happens to the significance of using a word when it's dislocated from its native provenance and introduced into a new one. I noted that some French words can sound more salacious when they're used in English than they do on their native linguistic ground: the French aren't nearly as obsessed with sex as we find it useful to imagine. Derogatives are particularly susceptible to this process. Consider the history of the antiquated *Sassenach*. The OED defines the word as **"**The name given by the Gaelic inhabitants of Great Britain and Ireland to their 'Saxon' or English neighbour," drawing its first citation in an English-language context from Smollett's *Humphrey Clinker*, published in 1771: "The Highlanders have no other name for the people of the Low-country, but Sassenagh, or Saxons." Let's take Smollett at his word on that. Now given the tenor of Anglo-Caledonian and Anglo-Hibernian relations up to that point, we can assume that the word had accumulated a rich set of unflattering connotations—that if you gave a Gaelic-speaking Highlander or Irishman from the age of George II a word-association test and offered *Sassenach*, he'd come back with the Gaelic words that translate as "arrogant," "sybaritic," "cruel," "snooty," and so on. But none of that was part of the meaning of the word. It might have been how pretty much everybody in those communities regarded the English, but in the unlikely event that they wanted to say something flattering about the English, *Sassenach* was the only name they had to hand.

Sassenach became a derogative only when it was adopted by English-speaking Scots and Irish who had the alternative term *Englishman* at their disposal. Those speakers could then use *Sassenach* to symbolically affiliate themselves with the Gaelic-speaking Celts in order to evoke their attitudes about the English, either in earnest or in a jocular spirit. Buck Mulligan uses the word with the latter tone in the Telemachus chapter of *Ulysses* when he says of the English houseguest Haines, "The Sassenach wants his morning rashers." But that in the context the word can't be used with the neutral implications it could potentially have in Irish. If Mulligan should say in English, "The Sassenach have always treated us decently," the remark could only be interpreted ironically, though he could make the same utterance in Irish and perhaps be counted sincere. But the narrowing of the word's implications follows from a purely pragmatic inference, not because it had acquired a conventional derogative meaning in its English use. If Mulligan had intended to say something nice about the English race while speaking English, after all, why would he make a point of using a word that signaled his affiliation with a group whose members stereotypically detest them? So at no point do the associations of the word work their way into the semantics of its English use, whether as descriptive content or a conventional implicature.[20] If it did—and this is a point I'll keep coming back to—then it would forego its outreach, so to speak. It can only convey what it does because it's the word that Gaelic-speakers use for the English and hence evokes their attitudes, in the same way that *alas* can only convey what it does because we think of it as the word that people used in bygone times.

The important point is this: when you pointedly substitute an exogenous term for the default name for a group, it will be colored by the attitudes toward that group that are *stereotypically* held to prevail in the term's native habitat as a descriptive term.[21] The imputed attitudes may be genuinely prevalent in that setting, as they were with the Gaelic uses of

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[20] This example creates some difficulty for those who maintain that assertions containing slurs have no truth-values or are inevitably false. If that's right (and if we take *Sassenach* to be a slur), then when Buck Mulligan points at Haines and says "He is a Sassenach," his utterance has no truth-value or is false; when he says in Irish *Is sasanach é*, his utterance is true. But he has used the same word with the same meaning in each; the only difference is that in the first instance he could have said "Englishman" as well.

[21] To be sure, there are lots of reasons for introducing an exogenous word into a context—to sound sophisticated, for example, or to signal street savvy. For these purposes, though, I'll consider only uses that are convey an attitude toward the term's referent.

Sassenach, but they can also be folkloric or fictive, as they are when we use French words like *scandale*.

Things work the same way when the appropriation is intra-linguistic, though the starting point is different. There was an actual speech community whose members used *Sassenach* as the default descriptive term for the English and who were stereotypically held to despise them. But there's no actual dialect or variety in contemporary America in which *nigger* is the default descriptive word for blacks—that is, whose speakers have a general contempt for blacks but will use the word *nigger* even when they want to say something positive about them. Even among the most virulent modern racists, the use of *nigger* is a pointed choice. With what community, then, is the person who uses the word affiliating himself; who are the actual parties to the relevant convention?

One way to answer is to say that the convention governing the use *nigger* belongs to the participants in a discourse in which blacks are viewed with contempt. Note that this is not the same as saying that *nigger* is the word that's conventionally used to refer to blacks when one has a contemptuous attitude towards them—in effect that this is just a condition on the felicitous utterance of the word. People often describe the use of these words in such terms. May (2005) suggests that *kike* means "Jewish and used to refer to Jews with hatred or hostility." Blackburn (1984) proposes that it is a convention to use *kraut* to refer to Germans when one has a contemptuous attitude toward them. And Saka (2007) explicates the meaning of *kraut* as "For any member S of the Anglophone community, S thinks "X was a kraut" ≡ (a) S thinks that X is a German and (b) S disdains Germans as a class." For all their differences, these proposals have in common the idea that slurs are governed by a convention of the language that restricts their use (inwardly or outwardly, as the case may be) to those who have a negative attitude towards the group they refer to—in Kaplan's (2005) terms, it suffices that the speaker have a derogatory attitude toward the reference for the utterance to be "expressively correct."

That's not what I'm arguing here. The obvious difference is one of scope. On the utterance-condition view, it's conventional among English-speakers to use *nigge*r to refer to blacks in order to express racist attitudes (leaving aside reclaimed and metaphorical uses of the word). On my view, roughly, it's a convention among certain English-speakers who have racist attitudes to use *nigger* to refer to blacks. Now the first version can't be right. To say that a word is

conventional among the members of a group is to say, among other things, that they discern a common interest to which it answers. But English-speakers in general don't recognize a common interest in having a disparaging word for blacks. True, quite a few manage to find a use for such words. Richard (2008) is being more than a bit Panglossian when he claims that "most contemporary speakers don't want words with the properties that [the standard view] ascribes to slurs. One wonders how there could be such words if most speakers don't want them." As Miščević (2011) notes, that "most" is hardly consistent with the ubiquity of slurring. But the domain of the relevant convention here isn't simply "racists" or "people with a contemptuous attitude toward blacks." As I noted earlier, the domain of a convention can correspond to the social extension of certain set of beliefs or attitudes, but only if its members are self-consciously aware of their common interests and associate those attitudes with a distinctive social identity.[22] In fact it follows from this analysis that prejudicials of this type are possible only when a socially distinctive subgroup or subdiscourse holds a self-consciously heterodox opinion about the denotation of a word.

The provenance of *nigger*, then, is the discourse a group of people who discern a common set of attitudes about blacks that they see as in some way shaping a social identity, attitudes that warrant having their own distinct name for blacks. To be sure, this particular word has a long and evocative history, unlike more fugitive terms such as *spade* and *spook*. *Nigger* trails a number of interconnected attitudes and identities, which a speaker may deliberately evoke even when they are no longer genuinely extant—the expressions of modern racism have an increasingly retro

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[22] Indeed, in a certain sense we have excluded the communities associated with these derogatives from legitimate linguistic authority. That's implicit when dictionaries give these words those curious definitions of the form "Used as a disparaging term for a Native American" or "A highly offensive term formerly used to refer to a Native American." That "used to" or "used as" formula is ordinarily reserved for words like interjections, as in "used to express surprise." Dictionaries don't define a common noun like *salt* as "a term used to refer to a colorless or white crystalline solid, chiefly sodium chloride." Not that such a definition wouldn't be accurate, but the "used to" seems superfluous. With derogatives, though, the "used as" undercuts the nominal realism that's usually implicit in a definition's form. We read the definition of *salt* as telling us what salt is, whereas the definition of *redskin* tells us only how some people use the word, effectively blocking the automatic inference to "A redskin is an American Indian," an interpretation of the definition that some readers are likely to be disturbed by, even when it's immediately followed by label "derog."

character. Here, as with *Sassenach*, we're often dealing with a stereotyped sensibility. The speakers who make *nigger* an expression of their social identity needn't be David Duke racists, they can be Quentin Tarantino racists, too. People may use the word to directly express hatred or contempt toward or about blacks, or in order to "bolster self-esteem for all in-groupers by highlighting the inferiority of an out-group and thus the relative superiority of the in-group," as Greenberg, Kirkland and Pyszczynski (Greenberg 1988) described the social use of slurs in an influential 1988 paper. But it may also serve to affirm the class identity that's encoded in the charge of "politically incorrectness"—as a demonstration of one's directness and authenticity and refusal to kowtow to the genteel hypocrites who self-righteously condemn racial slurs as vulgar. The solidarity invoked by the use of slurs isn't always a collateral effect of the contempt they direct at their explicit targets—they can be directed up as well as down.[23]

Prejudicials and Expressives

In suggesting that derogatives and other prejudicials are simply descriptive terms that require no special semantic mechanism to do their communicative work, I'm rejecting the thesis that derogatives belong to a distinct class of expressive terms, from which they derive certain characteristic properties. One of these is "nondisplaceability": the claim is that outside of direct quotation, derogatives can only convey the immediate attitude of the speaker at the time of speaking. As Potts (2005) notes, that entails that "Expressives are speaker-oriented no matter where they appear in the linguistic structure."

   Anderson and Lepore (2013) illustrate this point with the example

      6. I used to think that kikes were bad.

claiming that (6) has "no reading that conveys only a past offense." If this were categorically true of derogatives, we'd have to appeal to some supplementary semantic mechanism to explain why they didn't behave like other descriptive terms. But we want to be careful about trusting our intuitions about the kind of stripped-down examples that live out their entire lives in captivity on

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[23]   When you look at occurrences of *nigger* on the web and on Twitter, where utterances are open to anonymous public inspection, the predominant use seems to be in the service of the modern vice of trolling, where one tries to entertain like-minded fellows by saying something that will provoke an indignant reaction from some real or imaginary "respectable" listener-on who clearly can't take a joke.

philosophers' blackboards, in austere secession from reality.[24] In fact the reading changes notably when (6) is rewritten to suggest a plausible context, for example in the confessional memoir of an ex-extremist:

> 7. The militia's brainwashing made me so paranoid that I was always looking over my shoulder to see if I was being pursued by a band of murderous kikes and niggers.

An utterance of (7) doesn't preclude the speaker's holding the attitudes associated with the slurs, but that probably isn't the first interpretation that comes to mind.

In any case, arguing from intuitions has well-known pitfalls. It's more decisive to observe that people routinely produce sentences in which the attitudes implicit in a slur are attributed to someone other than the speaker:

> We lived, in that time, in a world of enemies, of course… but beyond enemies there were the Micks, and the spics, and the wops, and the fuzzy-wuzzies. A whole world of people not us… (edwardsfrostings.com)

> So white people were given their own bathrooms, their own water fountains. You didn't have to ride on public conveyances with niggers anymore. These uncivilized jungle bunnies, darkies.…You had your own cemetery. The niggers will have theirs over there, and everything will be just fine. (Ron Daniels in *Race and Resistance: African Americans in the 21st Century*)

> All Alabama governors do enjoy to troll fags and lesbians as both white and black Alabamians agree that homos piss off the almighty God. (Encyclopedia Dramatica)

> [Marcus Bachmann] also called for more funding of cancer and Alzheimer's research, probably cuz all those homos get all the money now for all that AIDS research. (Maxdad.com)

> Everybody loves to hate a homo. (Harvey Fierstein, on *All In*, MSNBC)

Examples like these undermine an argument that people have offered against a presuppositional account of content of slurs, pointing to sentences like:

> 8. #I am not prejudiced against Caucasians. But if I were, you would be the worst honky I know. (Potts 2005)

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[24] In fact the intuitions about (6) don't have anything to do with presence of a slur. You could make an analogous point about sentences like (i):

> i. I used to think that the vast right-wing conspiracy was bad.

In the absence of more context, we'd assume that the speaker of (i) still believes in the existence of the vast right-wing conspiracy, though the term itself is not a derogative or a slur.

The idea here is that the conditional, ordinarily a presupposition plug, doesn't neutralize the derogation conveyed by *honky* in the way it cancels the existence presupposition is in a sentence like "If France is a monarchy, the king of France lives in Paris." But the attested examples I've just cited suggest that a sentence like (8) shouldn't really be impossible. In fact the problem with (8) is in the content of the protasis of the conditional. The general assumption is that the condition for using *honky* or another slur is simply that the speaker should hold a disparaging attitude towards the group it refers to. But as we've seen, it isn't the speaker's actual attitudes that are decisive here, but his social identification with a group whose members hold certain disparaging attitudes about the group. And examples like (8) seem a lot less anomalous if we change the example to suggest such an identification and enrich the implicit context to make the utterance more plausible:

> 9. If I had been raised in a pious Orthodox family in rural Russia, I would no doubt despise you as a *pidoras* (homo).

This doesn't mean that the analysis of slurs in terms of semantic presuppositions is right after all, but these examples don't invalidate it.

On inspection, then, the "nondisplacement" phenomenon is illusory. Like other descriptive terms, these words are displaceable whenever the context makes it reasonable to assume that the speaker wants to ascribe a slur-belief or a slur-utterance to a third party.[25]

How Slurs Express

The defining property of the words described as expressives, not astonishingly, is that they express: they can report and evoke strong emotion, over and above whatever descriptive content they may convey. This is the feature of certain derogatives—not of all of them, and certainly not of all prejudicials—that I'm calling their oomph. It's a fatal weakness of descriptive approaches

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[25] Let me stress that this doesn't invalidate the existence of expressives as a linguistic class. Nondisplaceability is strongly associated with genuine expressives such as epitheticals (as in "that bastard Kresge"). Potts (2013) gives the example:

> i. Sue believes that that bastard Kresge should be fired.

Potts says that (i) has no reading in which it is only Sue, and not the speaker, who considers Kresge a bastard. I agree. But as we saw, it is much easier to bind a slur to the subject, rather than the speaker.

to derogatives that they can't account for this power. How is it possible for words like *chink* and *redskin* to inflict injury or instill fear? Is it simply in virtue of what they convey about their targets? Hom (2008) thinks so:

> To predicate a slur of someone is to say that they ought to be treated in such-and-such a way for having such-and-such properties, all because of being a member of a particular group. Depending on the practices and the properties, such a claim can be highly derogatory, and even threatening.

But as we saw, slurs needn't convey a laundry list of negative traits, so long as they indicate the speaker's attitude toward the group—for that matter, they needn't impute any particular properties to the individual they're applied to. And in any event, the expressive oomph of a term is largely independent of any stereotype it evokes. It's no less offensive to be called a kike by somebody who associates the word with crafty merchants than by somebody who thinks first of Christ-killers. At the same time, distinct derogatives for Jews (*jewboy*, *sheeny*, *yidl*, etc.) can evoke the same stereotype but differ greatly in their force or the specific attitude they convey.

A lot is when one replaces the a slur with a description, however detailed and disparaging, and not simply because the slur conveys the disparagement more pithily. A powerful slur encapsulates a whole history. As Langston Hughes wrote in his 1940 memoir *The Big Sea*:

> The word *nigger* sums up for us who are colored all the bitter years of insult and struggle in America the slave-beatings of yesterday, the lynchings of today, the Jim Crow cars…the restaurants where you may not eat, the jobs you may not have, the unions you cannot join. The word *nigger* in the mouths of little white boys at school, the word *nigger* in the mouth of the foreman at the job, the word *nigger* across the whole face of America! *Nigger! Nigger!*

On this account, the force of *nigger* goes beyond any description of its target: the injury arises not because it evokes the things that people who use the word have thought or said about blacks, but because it evokes the things such people have *done* to them—with the speaker ostentatiously affiliating himself with the perpetrators.

It's that power that makes it seem natural to group derogatives with other items that are described as expressives. As Potts and Roeper (2006) put it; "Almost invariably, a speaker's expressives indicate that she is in a heightened emotional state. They can tell us that she is angry or elated, frustrated or at ease, powerful or subordinated." But "indicate" is a tricky word here, as is "expressive" itself. The linguistic items described as expressives include intensifiers such as

fucking, imprecations such as *shit!,* vulgar descriptions such as *asshole,* and interjections such as *wow* and *ouch*. But they also include epithetic constructions ("that rascal Kaplan") and the constructions in sentences like "What a fool I've been" and "Rain or no rain, I'm not going."[26] The two groups strike us as different. The sentence "What big teeth you have!" expresses surprise and so does the sentence "Wow! Those are big fucking teeth!" But only the latter seems to *display* emotion—to "express" in the sense of the word that the OED defines as "to manifest or reveal by external tokens." These are what Gutzmann (2013) calls "expressives in the narrow sense,"— "expressions that express some emotion and evaluative attitude with a high degree of [affect]"—and for that reason we seem to ingest them differently. Kaplan (2005) describes the difference as follows:

> There appears to be a phenomenon of accepting displayed information as genuine, i.e., sincere, more readily than that which is asserted. Is this because we rationally regard expressives as less subject to the manipulations of insincerity? … Or are we simply programmed to react differently to two modes in which information is presented, with the processing of displayed information more closely connected to affective centers, and the processing of descriptive information more closely connected to higher cognitive centers?

This accords with most people's impressions of these words. But it's also deeply puzzling. Why should saying *ouch!* be more credible or genuine than simply asserting that one is in pain? Why do we take an utterance of *shit!* as a more sincere or immediate expression of someone's anger or frustration than an assertion of "I'm really angry"? After all, it isn't as if you can't use the interjections or expletives artfully or insincerely—three-year-olds are already adept at using *ouch!* as an interactive ploy.

 Could the impact of *ouch* be simply a matter of convention then, as most expressivist accounts assume? There's no question that *ouch* is a conventional way of indicating that one is in pain; as Quine (1959) observed, "One need only to prick a foreigner to appreciate that ['ouch'] is an English word." But could it also be conventional that *ouch* and analogous expressives convey immediacy or sincerity more than roughly equivalent descriptions of one's emotions? It's hard to see how. What would the content of the convention be, after all—"Reserve interjections for when you really, really mean it"? "Take the emotions signaled by vulgarities as especially

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[26] Expressives also include, on some accounts, operators like *yet* and *still*, which don't figure in the truth-conditions of sentences but have no particular emotional import. I'm going to ignore these here.

authentic"? It would be like introducing a convention that mandated that we interpret the emotions signaled by sentences ending in two exclamation marks as more genuine than those signaled by sentences ending in only one. There can be a conventional means for asserting that P but not for deeply and sincerely asserting that P—or not one, in any event, that we can expect speakers to conform to out of a mere interest in coordinating their practices. Once mendacity has been loosed in the world, there are no privileged forms of expression that mere convention can insulate from corruption. Semantically, then, there can't be expressives in the strong, "display" form of the notion. There has to be something about these words over and above their conventional meanings that constitutes a credible manifestation of sincere emotion, even if it is paradoxically subject to our conscious control.

This is a fundamental problem for most expressivist accounts of slurs, which attribute their effects to a "conventional evaluative dimension" (Richard 2008) or an expressivist semantic component (Jeshion forthcoming), sometimes conjoined with a descriptive component to create a hybrid meaning for the words. Expressivists sometimes explicate these effects by appealing to implicit gestures or other paralinguistic devices that give the words their extrasemantic oomph— a raised middle finger, a sneer, a throat-cutting gesture, an angry tone of voice. Critics have pointed out that those analogies aren't really apt, since a paralinguistic sign can't generally indicate the grounds for the contempt conveyed by an derogative—that it's based on race or religion, for example, rather than a personal dislike for the target. Then too, a raised middle finger or a sneer can only indicate the speaker's own attitude, whereas someone who deliberately uses a derogative conveys an attitude with an independent social grounding, whether he actually endorses it or not. But beyond all that, to appeal to an unarticulated semantic feature that takes the place of an implicit or invisible gesture is just another way of sneaking the word's expressive force into its conventional meaning. An invisible display isn't a display at all.[27]

What we're looking for here is some feature of a word or of its use that *enacts* a display of emotion, a token of earnestness, as it were. I think we can locate such a feature in each of the

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[27] Let me stress that this is not a criticism of the expressivists' account of the conversational *effects* of these words, which seems generally right to me, but only of their account of the mechanism they introduce to explain it. It would be surprising if so fundamental a philosophical view could stand or fall on the empirical analysis of some English expressions.

types that count as an expressive display, but it takes a different form and has a different etiology in each instance. Interjections like *wow* are the basic case, where the signals of genuineness are primarily iconic. Interjections are the stylized phonetic simulations of prelinguistic vocalizations—Rousseau and Herder saw them as the link between the animal and human, in a transition that is reproduced in the course of acquisition, a theme that reappears in later philosophical writing.[28] At the same time, their syntactic isolation makes them seem autonomous irruptions in the flow of speech—so that, in Condillac's words, "they always seem to escape at the moment of producing their effect." (1998 (1747)). Those features help create the impression that the words are "'purely expressive,' 'primitive,' 'unsocialized,'" as Erving Goffman (1978) put it, "providing witnesses with a momentary glimpse behind our mask." That's the impression that prompts Kaplan, as it did Herder, to imagine that our response to them is ethologically programmed.

With vulgarisms like *shit* or *asshole*, by contrast, the emotion is manifested by the speaker's willingness to utter a taboo word in defiance of conversational propriety, even in settings where flouting such norms is ritualized—settings, that is, where it is compulsory to be naughty. To pronounce such a word signals that one's emotions have overcome one's inhibitions; as Goffman noted, swearing is "a form of behavior whose very meaning is that it is something blurted out, something that has escaped control." As often as not, of course, these "blurtings" are stylized simulations, but even so they testify to the speaker's willingness to affront the sensibilities of a real or hypothetical listener-on. It is a matter of linguistic convention that *shit* names shit and that the word is consequently used as an imprecation, but it isn't merely conventional that we count someone's utterance of *shit*! as a show of especially strong feeling.

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[28] Cf. Wittgenstein, *Philosophical Investigations*, §44: "Words are connected with the primitive, natural expressions of the sensation and are used in their place. A child has hurt himself and he cries, and then adults talk to him and teach him exclamations and, later, sentences… the verbal expression of pain replaces crying and does not describe it." There's a parallel here to Potts and Roeper's (2006) elegant analysis of the expressive construction exemplified by "You fool," which they see as a kind of atavistic survival of the root-level small clauses of child language. As they aptly conclude: "When speaking expressively, we're all children."

Flouting Neutrality

And slurs? Like vulgarisms, they achieve their effects indexically rather than iconically, but unlike vulgarisms they require no simulation of spontaneity. The expressive manifestation begins with the speaker's choice to pointedly conform to the usage of a group whose conventions would not normally govern the speech-situation. This is what people are getting at when they say that the speaker is choosing to use an evaluative term rather than a "neutral counterpart" (see, e.g., Richard (2008), Hay (2011), Croom (2011), Bolinger (ms)). As I noted, though, neither "neutral" nor "counterpart" is the right notion here. "Neutrality" suggests a semantic or lexical property rather than a sociolinguistic one and implies that what distinguishes slurs is simply a negative evaluation; it flattens all the social complexities of the attitudes these words convey.[29]

In fact the notion of a "neutral term" is as much of a social construct as the old Crayola crayon color designated "flesh." Even terms that have no denotational synonyms can be freighted with connotations—*Sassenach* wasn't "neutral" in eighteenth-century Gaelic nor is *pedophile* "neutral" modern American English. What we think of as neutrality is really a socially negotiated default that is often reevaluated from one period or setting to the next, particularly with the names of categories that are notoriously sensitive to changing attitudes. Fifty years ago, *gay* was a positively valenced term used among a relatively small community as a substitute for the noun *homosexual*, a default term that was anything but "neutral." Now the words' positions are in a sense reversed, at least in their application as attributive nouns to social categories like marriage, community, lifestyle and "agendas." In most public discourse, *gay* is the default term, and *homosexual* is a derogative associated with the discourse of those who oppose to granting equal rights and status to gays. True, people on the cultural right would no doubt argue that it's *homosexual* that's the neutral term (and so it can be as an adjective describing sexual behavior itself). But once the media and the pollsters have settled on *gay* as a default term, to insist on referring to "homosexual rights" or "homosexual marriage" becomes a tendentious gesture. Yet one wouldn't want to argue that *gay* is "neutral" or free of connotations, either. Rather, it has come to occupy what the political scientist Daniel Hallin (1986) calls the "sphere of consensus"

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[29] It's reasonable to describe words as being semantically neutral when they're opposed to descriptively equivalent hybrid terms that have contrasting evaluations: *pertinacious* is neutral as opposed to *stubborn* or *resolute*, say.

in journalism, a domain in which the requirements of balanced reporting are suspended and "journalists do not feel compelled to present an opposing view point or to remain disinterested observers." (Hallin opposes the sphere of consensus to "the sphere of legitimate controversy.")[30] In the broader American public discourse, that is, you can refer to someone as gay without having to justify the term's connotations, but also without any strong implication that you are signing on to them, whereas to speak of homosexual marriage or the homosexual community commits you personally to the connotations that the term evokes. The default term is not necessarily a term without evaluative connotations, but rather the one for whose connotations the speaker need assume the least personal responsibility, beyond tacitly acknowledging that they're generally assumed as a basis for conversation.

To choose to use a prejudicial rather than a default term, then, isn't simply to endorse one evaluation of the reference rather than another, but to commit oneself to an evaluation rather than merely acceding to whatever evaluation is implicit in the default. As I noted, people have various reasons for doing this in a given situation. One is to affiliate themselves with a community (or group, or social identity) whose attitudes about A differ from those that ordinarily pass unchallenged in the conversational setting. In the case of slurs, the associated group is one with hostile or derogatory views about A or A's. When the word is used as a direct insult, the speaker says in effect, "I'm speaking as a member of the group who hold you in contempt" (or whatever the more specific derogatory attitude is). The utterance doesn't simply evoke the community but materially obtrudes it into the context. If you were looking for a gesture that achieved a roughly similar effect, you could think of someone pronouncing *Jew* in an exaggerated German accent or while making a Nazi salute, or of someone saying *black* while miming a noose—gestures that

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[30] In that sense, *gay* is different from "pro-life" and "pro-choice." Neither of the latter can be used by journalists without seeming to compromise their claims to objectivity, obliging them to resort to paraphrases like "pro-abortion rights" and similar terms that almost never appear outside of journalism or formal policy discussions. When views are highly polarized, there is often no single default convention that answers to the interests of everyone in the larger discourse of public life. Neither "illegal alien" nor "undocumented immigrant" is a "neutral" term; to use either one is to identify oneself with the views of a particular discourse. (The *New York Times* goes with "illegal immigrant," but that's not really neutral, just a way of Solomonically splitting the difference.)

evoke, not the speaker's own opinions, but the history of animus and ill-treatment that the group has been subjected to.

It's no wonder that a slur can be perceived as hurtful or threatening when directed at its target, particularly when the speaker's affiliatory claim isn't implausible. But the effect of the move depends on how we read the speaker's intentions. Things can assume a different cast when the speaker himself is a member of the targeted group. Not always, it's true; a slur can suggest introjected racism, as *nigger* does in the mouth of the servile house slave played by Samuel Jackson in Tarantino's *Django Unchained*. But when it's contextually implausible that the speaker shares the attitudes associated with the native provenance of the convention, we're likely to interpret the usage ironically or defiantly, which is sometimes the first step in linguistic reclamation of the word. The details of that process are complicated, but for now it's enough to note that, as with the various other features that generate the expressive impact of interjections and vulgarities, all of this sits outside of the semantic content of the term. [31]

But there are other possibilities. If the utterance isn't directed at a particular target and the speaker assumes that he and the addressee share the attitudes and social identity associated with the word, its use becomes a signal of group solidarity, all the more so when its use is stigmatized by elite or authoritative opinion. To use *nigger,* in modern America, is rather like using a vulgarity; one can't pronounce either the N-word or the F-word without evoking the people who disapprove of it, inviting a like-minded listener to join in complicit transgression. This isn't to say that the stigma attached to these words is the source of their power to injure, as Anderson and Lepore argue. But it does play a role in their power to bond.

Sometimes, too, the presumption of common social identity can simply fail, when the speaker either deliberately or inadvertently mischaracterizes the addressee's attitudes. That can

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[31] Reclamation is a two-stage process, whereby a word is first used by members of the target group in a defiant or ironic way, then becomes a conventional identification answering to the interests of the target group itself, no longer parasitic on its derogative use—a new word, in effect. Gays who use *queer* nowadays are not looking over their shoulder, and a description like Queer Studies has no ironic implications; rather it's the default term for the subject in certain contexts. In those contexts, straights can now use *queer* without with any suggestion of derogation (See, e.g., Brotsema 2004, Zwicky 1997). In any event, it's a mistake to think that the facts of reclamation could be enlisted to argue for one or another approach to the linguistic analysis of these words. No form of meaning is impervious to ironic reappropriation.

give rise to another form of offense, this to the addressee rather than to the target of the term. As I noted, this was the principal grounds for objections to racial derogatives in nineteenth-century America, when *nigger* was criticized by whites chiefly as a token of the vulgarity and ill-breeding of the speaker—a charge with considerable bite in an age governed by the ideals of gentlemanly conduct. Behind those charges, it's true, was the belief that "no man should look down to anyone as his inferior"—or at least give open voice to that sentiment. But white critics rarely dwelt on the effect of the words on the people they were aimed at. Their examples always focused on a speaker who used *nigger* before other whites who could presumably assess his lack of breeding, on the insolence to his listeners and the discredit he visited on himself—these were "boomerang words," one writer said in 1914, which "hit their users harder than those they are aimed at."

Morally speaking, those critics weren't wrong: you have a right to be offended when someone utters something (a slur, a smutty joke or a political reference) that presumes that you and he share an attitude that you in fact find discreditable. But we rarely tax the user of a slur for an offense to the nontargeted listener, as opposed to the group or individual it insults. Indeed, liberal-minded people nowadays tend to abstain from describing slurs as vulgar, which smacks of class superiority and may suggest a smug self-congratulation about their own open-mindedness. But the class associations are part of the reason why many people avoid these words: they're not only insulting to their targets but disreputable. The suburban parent who calls the school principal to complain because eight-year-old Billy came home using the N-word is apt to be distressed not just by the racist attitudes the child may be picking up but by the vulgarity of the phrase, suspecting that he learned it from the same kids from whom he picked up "I ain't got nothing," not to mention "Who gives a shit?" And in modern times, associations like these have played a role in investing certain slurs with a toxicity that affects their use over and above the attitudes they're used to convey.

Toxic Words

The dominant operation in the phenomenology of language is displacement, as words acquire distinctive feeling-tones from their setting and use. *Shit!* is dirty because shit is dirty, in more than a purely figurative way. The taint of the reference attaches materially to the syllable itself, even when the word is used in a figurative way or embedded in another word—the principle that

small children have already mastered when they take a salacious pleasure in saying "shampoo"—and one reinforced as we learn the synonyms and circumlocutions that allow us to refer to shit without calling it by its true name.

A few slurs, such as *nigger,* are susceptible to a variety of this effect, though they inherit their taint from their contexts of use rather than their referents. Leaving aside their reclaimed uses—and perhaps not even there—many people find these items literally unspeakable. Simply to pronounce them is to activate them, and they aren't detoxified by placing them in quotation marks. In that way, they resemble strong vulgarities—they call to mind the universal solvent sought by the medieval alchemists, which no container could hold. Toxicity, that is, is a property that's attached to a act of pronouncing a certain phonetic shape, rather than to an act of assertion, which is why here, too, people can be disconcerted when all or part of the word appears as a segment of other words, as in *niggardly* or even *denigrate*.[32]

The rise of toxicity—the fetishation of slurs—sheds interesting light on the changing ideologies behind modern racial attitudes, but it has only a restricted and marginal relevance to the phenomenon of slurs in general. There's no grounds for making it the driving force in a comprehensive account of these words, which is the approach taken by Anderson and Lepore (2013). Arguing pretty much exclusively on the basis of observations about *nigger,* they claim that the use of slurs in indirect discourse is "often offensive," and on that basis go on to argue that what makes slurs in general offensive is not their content but a blanket interdiction on their use. Now inasmuch I've been arguing here that the disparagement conveyed by slurs is not carried by their linguistic meanings, I'm sympathetic to Anderson and Lepore's rejection of content-based accounts of the words, and they do well to draw attention to the singular toxicity of some of them. As we saw, moreover, the stigma attached to the words can strengthen their power as signals of solidarity. But it can't explain why slurs in general are offensive.

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[32] During the 2008 election, Senator Barack Obama was criticized by some when he said that his former pastor Jeremiah Wright, held "views that denigrate both the greatness and the goodness of our nation." As one said, "What does [*denigrate*] mean, literally? To blacken. The implication here is… that anything white is pure and virtuous and anything black is dangerous, corrupt and evil." But one suspects that the objection has as much to do with the presence of the syllable *-nig* as with the word's etymology; people who condemn *denigrate* on these grounds tell me that they have no objection to *atrocious*, which is ultimately from Gk ατερ, "black."

For one thing, only a handful of slurs are genuinely toxic. People are not usually distressed at the mere mention of *redskin*, *wop*, *frog*, *greaser, kraut, spade, Jap, polack, wetback, cracker,* or *redneck*. And while one can argue that a couple of words like *kike* and *spic* are disturbing simply as phonetic forms, the reaction to those words is chiefly a recent extension of the toxification of *nigger*. Historically, in fact, objections to slurs by their targets were rarely noticed by the larger community, and were almost never the source of general prohibitions on their use. People have been calling Indians redskins for 250 years, but until well into the twentieth century, nobody found anything to object to about the word—for most of that period, not even Indians themselves. Yet it would be hard to deny that *redskin* was a derogative all along by modern standards. Similarly, when Merriam-Webster's *Third International* appeared in 1961, it labeled terms for homosexuals like *fag*, *queer*, and *fairy* simply as slang. That doesn't mean that the editors didn't realize that those terms were derogatory—of course they did—but only that, like most other straight or closeted Americans of the period, they didn't see anything particularly wrong in disparaging homosexuals.[33] The notion that the community as a whole is morally obliged to defer to the members of a group in deciding what to call them is quite recent, and by no means generally accepted even now, as the ongoing controversies over political correctness make clear.

Even in the case of *nigger*, moreover, the interdiction is largely limited to spoken use. The word is dramatically less common in broadcasts than it used to be, but publications like *Washington Post* and the *New York Times* have few reservations about printing the word in the course of quoting someone (in fact the word that really bothers the *Post*'s style guru is the euphemism "N-word," which he calls "trivializing and childish").[34] The print media are much

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[33] As the lexicographer Sidney Landau observes (1984) lexicographers generally include warning labels on ethnic terms only when direct pressure is brought to bear on them. "[The lexicographer] is usually under no pressure to omit. . . offensive terms like white trash, hillbilly or redneck; queer or fag; cretin or retard (as terms of abuse). These epithets are not addressed to members of groups that can exert pressure on state commissioners of education; hence they are unimportant and considered to offend no one. Most are not even labeled by dictionaries as offensive. The question that arises is: To whom are they not offensive?"

[34] Nexis searches show that since 1994, occurrences of *nigger* have declined about 50 percent in major newspapers, against more than 90 percent in broadcast news programs. In 2012, it was spoken only four

more circumspect about repeating genuine vulgarities. When George W. Bush was heard on a live mic during the 2000 campaign describing a *New York Times* reporter as an asshole, the *Times* was obliged to report him as having used "an obscenity," while other papers less concerned about their dignity paraphrased him as referring to an "orifice" or a word that rhymed with "glass bowl."

But the toxification of *nigger* is a relatively new phenomenon. It's true that people were reticent about saying the N-word long before that euphemism appeared, though largely because of its vulgarity—in earlier times, in fact, it was more acceptable in speech than in writing.[35] But the stigmatization of the form itself among whites really began in the 1930's or so. It was in part a response to longstanding black objections. As Langston Hughes (2002 (1940)) wrote in *The Big Sea*:

> The word *nigger* to colored people of high and low degree is like a red rag to a bull. Used rightly or wrongly, ironically or seriously, of necessity for the sake of realism, or impishly for the sake of comedy, it doesn't matter. Negroes do not like it in any book or play whatsoever, be the book or play ever so sympathetic in its treatment of the basic problems of the race. …The word *nigger,* you see, sums up for us who are colored all the bitter years of insult and struggle in America.[36]

In response to objections by black cast members, David Selznick purged the word from the film version of *Gone with the Wind* (it occurred almost 100 times in the book). (Aim 2007) But the perceived coarseness of the word was just as important; Funk and Wagnall's 1921 Standard Desk Dictionary defined *nigger* as "a negro; now vulgar." And it was only at this point that people began to make a systematic effort to eliminate *nigger* from the language—the first stirrings of the doctrine that some describe as silentism. The purge was a more extensive undertaking than it would have been for any other slur, since *nigger* had an unparalleled purchase in the American

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times on the broadcast and cable TV news networks, in each instance by blacks recalling the insults they endured in their childhoods.

[35] A contributor to an 1894 number of the *Century Magazine* wrote that "An American feels something vulgar in the word 'nigger'. A 'half-cut' [semi-genteel] American, though he might use it in speech, would hardly print it."

[36] Hughes made these often quoted remarks in the course of explaining the outrage of many Negro critics over the title of Carl Van Vechten's novel *Nigger Heaven.* But it should be added that he went on to describe those attacks as uninformed and stupid, and as betraying a "strange inability… to understand irony or satire."

vocabulary. It occurred in idioms ("work like a nigger," "nigger in the woodpile"), in children's rhymes ("ten little niggers," "catch a nigger by the toe"), in hundreds of place names, and in the names of colors, fish, animals, sweets, and fireworks, among many other things (cf. *nigger brown, niggerfish, niggertoe, nigger duck, niggerball, nigger chaser*).[37] The purge therefore called for a kind of global search and replace, which required focusing on the word as a formal unit. That inevitably contributed to the fetishization of the word. But it wasn't until about twenty years ago that people began to refer to it with the same kind of initialized euphemism used for *shit* and *fuck* and to describe it with terms like "obscenity" and "curse word" with no sense of speaking figuratively. (Cf. the *Boston Globe* review of *Django Unchained*: "Jackson can deliver the n-word, and other profanities, with ketchup, mustard, and relish.")[38] That was about the time when schools began to stop teaching *Huckleberry Finn* and people began to get in trouble for saying things like *niggardly*.

Anderson and Lepore see the toxicity of slurs as the source of general offensiveness: "When a word is prohibited, then whoever violates its prohibition risks offending those who respect it." But the power of *nigger* to engender discomfort even in quotational contexts isn't at all the same as the offense it generates when it's used as a derogation. You may be discomfited to hear someone say "Michael Richards said 'nigger' in his night-club act," but the remark isn't intrinsically racist in the way that Richards' own "He's a nigger" was. To be sure, people may take advantage of the putative dispensation for using these words in quotative contexts to repeat them conspicuously, as the right-wing provocateur Matt Drudge did in a blog item linking to a review of Quentin Tarantino's *Django Unchained* that he headed "'N*GGER. N*GGER. N*GGER. N*GGER. N*GGER. N*GGER.'" In comments and tweets, more than one person

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[37] As a child in New York City in the early 1950's, I learned the version of the choosing rhyme with *tiger*, unaware that there was a variant with *nigger*. Middle-class whites of my age who grew up in places like West Virginia tell me that they were told by their parents not to say the *nigger* version, while those who grew up in those years in the deep South knew of no other. I estimate that in that period the *tiger* isogloss was moving south at a rate of about 50 miles a year. But as late as 2003, a two African Americans sued Southwest Airlines for running an ad in which a flight attendant said to passengers "Eenie, meenie, minie, mo, pick a seat, we gotta go," which they claimed had racist implications.

[38] To be sure, the "F-word" formula itself first appeared only in the 1980's, so its extension to "the N-word" around 1995 was relatively rapid.

suggested that that was the headline Drudge had been dying to use throughout his coverage of the 2012 campaign. Perhaps it was, but here the purpose was simply to troll for liberal indignation under cover of citation. But as justifiably indignant as the reactions to the headline were, they weren't what they would have been if Drudge had used a photo of Obama rather than one of Tarantino. The toxicity of the word alone doesn't explain its derogative force, and while many people are circumspect about pronouncing the word in any context, most seem to be generally aware of this distinction.[39]

Appendix: Prejudicials, Hybrids and Metaphors; Distractions and Blind Alleys

As I suggested at the outset, there's a lot of terminological variation in discussions of these words, which is connected to conceptual confusions that have led the discussion down various blind alleys. One point of confusion involves the relation between prejudicials and hybrid terms. The English lexicon is bristling with words like these, the majority of them expressing negative rather than positive evaluations, since that tends to be where we concentrate our classificatory energies. You think of all the pejoratives for cars, like *jalopy*, *clunker*, *lemon*, *beater*, *heap*, of pejorative adjectives like *shrill* and *bloated*, or of personal descriptions like *bigot*, *boor*, *nincompoop*, *termagant*, *asshole*, *hack* (writer) and *poetaster*. In the interest of terminological clarity, I'll call these negative hybrid terms pejoratives, as opposed to the negative prejudicials I've been calling derogatives.

Some people have seen derogatives as the poster children for hybrid terms—lumping, e.g., *wop* and *commie* with *punk* and *loser* (see, e.g., Jeshion (forthcoming), Bach (2012), Copp (2001), Richard (2008), and Saka (2007), but also Schroeder (2009) and Hay (2011) for criticisms of this view).That doesn't seem implausible on the face of things: as Copp points out, *wop* seems both to describe an Italian and to render a judgment on the class. But derogatives and pejoratives are fundamentally different, and even antithetical. The obvious difference is that

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[39] The journalism critic and blogger Jim Romenesko reports that when a TV news reporter in Bloomsburg, Pennsylvania tried to get people in the street to say that the local newspaper had "crossed the line" in repeating the word *nigger* in a story about a school board member who had resigned after using it, he found no takers: "An older white woman said: "They're just quoting what the man said, so that's not a fault of the newspaper." But TV news in general is much more skittish about the word, even in quotative contexts, than the print media are. http://jimromenesko.com/?p=38353

pejoratives like *jalopy* and *bigot* apply to individuals in virtue of their singular circumstances and histories whereas derogatives like *commie* and *redskin* apply to individuals in virtue of the class they belong to. That in turn corresponds to other differences. For one thing, pejoratives and other hybrids often lack nonjudgmental alternatives. Their meanings have a descriptive component, of course, but we don't invariably have separate words for something that exemplifies just those descriptive properties but withholds judgment of them, and in fact the descriptive and evaluative components are often interdependent in a way that makes their disentanglement impossible. What would be a neutral equivalent for *bigot,* say—how would you neutrally describe a person who is dispositionally and irrationally prejudiced against various social groups?

Then too, both the descriptive and evaluative components of hybrid terms enter into the truth conditions of assertions containing the term, so that with these, unlike prejudicials, you can reject the assertion by rejecting either component. Take the hybrid word *slur* itself. When someone says that W is a slur for the members of G, we can contest her claim either of two ways. We can deny the descriptive aptness of calling W a slur, pointing out that it's actually a fond or neutral label—that's what we'd say if the word in question was the Englishman's *Blighty* or the Australians' *Oz*. Or we could reject the implied judgment about the moral unacceptability of the term, as with *Ratzi* for Nazis. The word certainly conveys contempt, but we demur from calling it a slur because the attitude seems justified. And when we assert the evaluative content of a pejorative, there's often a sense of tautology. As I noted earlier, assertions like "Depravity is deplorable," "Fleecing someone is unfair," and "Bullies aren't nice," are apt to evoke the "Tell me something else I don't know" reaction that we didn't get with sentences like "Chinks are devious" or "Free enterprise is a productive system." But if the evaluative component were part of the meanings of both prejudicials and hybrid terms, we'd be left wondering why it figured so differently in the assertions containing each type.

One reason why it's easy to lose sight of the distinction between hybrid terms and prejudicials is that words sometimes migrate from one category to the other. *Bitch* has long been a pejorative for a woman with certain unpleasant characteristics—that is, as a hybrid term—but in parts of hip hop culture it has aquired another use as a derogative term for women in general; i.e., as a prejudicial. When Lil' Abner says, "I went out with a lot of bitches," his utterance is ambiguous: he might mean either that he dated a lot of nasty or unpleasant women, or just that he

dated a lot of women. In the first instance you can contest his utterance by rejecting either component; you can say either "No, Ab, you've never been out on a date" or "No, your dates were always considerate and gentle." But if he's using *bitch* simply as a derogative for women in general you can only make the first objection; you can't say "Well, you did go out with a lot of women but they were all very nice." The maliciousness that's evoked by *bitch* may be resonating in the background when it's used as slur, but it isn't part of what one asserts with the word. In the same way, when *bitch* is used as a derogative the speaker doesn't necessarily convey a negative attitude about the particular person it refers to, no more than "My neighbor is a chink" does. The derogation may fall only on the class to which the referent belongs. In the hip hop sense of the word, there's no contradiction in saying "That bitch is kind and sweet" though that utterance sounds contradictory if *bitch* is being used as a routine pejorative.

The shift can go the other way, as well. A derogative that conveys a negative attitude towards all members of G can be used as a pejorative that applies just to the members of G who actually have the negative traits associated with the group. This is the process that enables people to make semantic distinctions between derogatives and their default equivalents, usually factitiously. A character in a novel says, "He's a Christian but not what you'd call a goy." A headline in a public relations newswire reads "DC's PR Luminaries Explain Why 'I'm Not a Flack.'" Chris Rock used to do a comedy routine contrasting Negroes and niggers, and others have contrasted those terms in a more repugnant way.[40] In each case, there is an imputed meaning difference between the neutral or default term and the offensive one, but only because the offensive term is being used as a pejorative rather than derogative. The difference is not as between *German* and *boche*, but as between *white* and *redneck*.

Note that in these cases the stereotypical traits that are only implied by the derogative term become part of the lexical meaning of the pejorative derived from it, and hence are subject to contestation. Someone who says "X is a fairy," using the word as a derogative for homosexual

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[40] Randall Kennedy (2003) relates the following story: "When Charles McLaurin, an organizer with the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee (SNCC), was jailed in Columbia, Mississippi, a patrolman asked him, 'are you a Negro or a nigger?' When McLaurin responded, 'Negro,' another patrolman hit him in the face. When he gave the same reply to the same question, McLaurin was again beaten. Finally, asked the question a third time, he answered, 'I am a nigger.' At that point the first patrolman told him to leave town and warned, 'If I ever catch you here again I'll kill you.'"

men in general, might convey his belief that such men are effeminate. But one can't contest his assertion by insisting that X is macho, the way one can if *fairy* is interpreted as a pejorative for effeminate homosexuals. This importation of stereotypes into semantics is typical of the figurative or extended uses of words. When we describe a man as a gorilla, we semantically convey that he is strong or brutal, properties that are only stereotypically associated with the animals literally denoted by the term, and if that metaphorical usage becomes conventionalized, what was formerly part of a stereotype becomes part of the new meaning. But the figure at work in the derivation of pejorative senses of *nigger* or *goy* isn't metaphor but a kind of extensional doubling. It involves a pretense that synonyms from different languages or dialects are semantically distinct, as if the speech communities' differing conceptions of the terms' denotation corresponded to different kinds of things. The process isn't restricted to prejudicials: people often invest synonyms from two languages with different cultural implications. Some people profess to discern a difference between the English *artist* and the French *artiste*, as the words are used in the performing arts, where the latter suggests an egotistical or temperamental disposition:

> [Delerue] was a proud artist, but not an artiste. Unlike other film composers…whose high opinion of their talents made them very particular about what projects they accepted and very difficult to work with, Delerue wasn't picky.

There's no real denotational difference between the words, but the final *-e* invests *artiste* with the pretentious aura in which some artists are thought to envelop themselves, just as it made *scandale* sound salacious.

The failure to distinguish derogatives from the pejoratives derived from them has led to various misapprehensions. For example, Hom argues that derogatives are not synonymous with their neutral equivalents by claiming that one cannot truthfully report the utterance in (10) with (11):

> 10. I am Chinese, and not a chink.
> 11. A said that he is Chinese and not Chinese.

But (10) can be understood in two ways. It could express a metalinguistic negation, as in "I reject the word *chink*." In that case the word *chink* is implicitly mentioned, not used, and hence can't be replaced by a synonymous term. Or the speaker might be using *chink* as a pejorative for a Chinese person who is obsequious, devious, and so forth, in which case it doesn't apply to all

Chinese. In that case, too, it can't be replaced by *Chinese*, but only because the pejorative *chink* and the demonym *Chinese* have different linguistic meanings. In the same vein, Hom argues that if one takes *Chinese* and *chink* to be synonymous, then "the racist claim 'Chinese are chinks' literally expresses the same proposition as 'Chinese are Chinese,' which is a necessary truth. But "Chinese are chinks" makes a racist claim only if the words are *not* synonymous—that is, if *chink* denotes the subset of Chinese who display the stereotypical features that racists ascribe to the entire class. Otherwise, the sentence simply makes the linguistic claim that the two terms are co-extensive, and while the sentence may be tainted by some toxicity in the word *chink* itself, it doesn't predicate anything of the Chinese, other than when you're squinting at it on a philosopher's blackboard. In fact it's hard to think of any context in which one would encounter the sentence used with this meaning other than in a discussion of the use of racial epithets.[41] Croom (2011) makes the same mistake in arguing that postulating the synonymy of slurs and their default equivalents requires one to accept that "racist claims such as 'African Americans are niggers' literally express analytic truths that are knowable a priori."

These words have related uses that have led to other confusions. *Nigger* can sometimes be applied to non-blacks, as in the phrase "white nigger." Croom (2011) and Tirrell (1999) take these uses as entailing that *nigger* is semantically distinct from *African American*, which can't be used in this way. But the OED gives this use a separate sense to mean "A person who does menial labour; any person considered to be of low social status," adding the label *derogatory* and citing the use of *white nigger* from 1835. This use of *nigger* is distinct from its use to mean "a person who is socially, politically, or economically disadvantaged or exploited; a victim of

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[41] Indeed, of the 60 Google hits for "Chinese are chinks," none makes a racist claim about the Chinese in general. The great majority involve explicit or implicit mentions of the slur (excluding those that are quoting Hom's papers and a few where the context isn't sufficient to determine the intended meaning):

    Japanese are nippers, Vietnamese are gooks, Filipinos are flips, Chinese are chinks or chinamen. Get your slurs straight.
    I generally refer to every race/minority using the most offensive terms . chinese are chinks, women are bitches, gays are faggots…

In two cases, *chink* is clearly used as a pejorative for those Chinese who have certain negative attributes:

    Not all Indians are Kelings and not all Chinese are Chinks.… By kelings and chinks, I refer to those brethren of ours that still live in medieval times. (from a Singaporean site)
    Yes, that's right: Red Communist Chinese are Chinks, Spooks, Gooks, etc. … The rest of the Chinese population have my admiration. (Freerepublic.com)

prejudice likened to that endured by African Americans," as the OED defines it, citing Lennon and Ono's "Woman is the nigger of the world" and adding that "In this use usually with awareness of the word's offensive connotations, but without intention to cause offence…."[42] This sense emerged a great deal later than the "menial labourer" sense, and the mechanism of sense-extension here works differently from most other metaphors. When we say, for example, "The Chinese are the Jews of Southeast Asia," we use a straightforward metaphor to suggest a mapping between the features of the source and the target groups (both are industrious commercial minorities, both are sometimes resented by the majority community for their wealth or clannishness, and so on). But "Woman is the nigger of the world" doesn't imply that women are actually like blacks in their traits or behavior, but rather that they are treated as blacks are treated *by the people who refer to them as niggers*. Like the uses I mentioned above, these uses involve a specious disjunction between the denotations of *nigger* and *black*; the difference is that here the properties that distinguish the two are not those imputed to blacks by the members of the speech-communities that use the two words, but rather the differential treatment that blacks receive at the hands of each. That's why *nigger* can't be replaced by synonymous words. It also explains why these uses of *nigger* don't strike us as racist in the way the word's literal uses do. Lennon and Ono's use of the word may be unsettling, given its phonetic toxicity, but they clearly aren't affiliating themselves with the attitudes of the speech-community to which *nigger* belongs—a distinction that would be inexplicable if all the uses of the word really had to be laid to one general meaning.

Acknowledgments

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[42] The OED dates this use from 1993 but in fact it goes back at least to 1941, when Wyndham Lewis wrote: "The poor are the niggers in this country"—still, more than a century later than the "labourer" sense.

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