

# The Social Life of Slurs

Geoff Nunberg

School of Information, UC Berkeley

Jan. 22, 2016

To appear in Daniel Fogal, Daniel Harris, and Matt Moss (eds.) (2017): *New Work on Speech Acts* (Oxford, UK: Oxford University Press).

Chaque mot a son histoire. —Jules Gilliéron

## **A Philological Caution**

### ***The Emergence of Slurs***

We wear two hats when we talk about slurs, as engaged citizens and as scholars of language. The words had very little theoretical interest for philosophy or linguistic semantics before they took on a symbolic role in the culture wars that broke out in and around the academy in the 1980s.<sup>1</sup> But once scholars' attention was drawn to the topic, they began to discern connections to familiar problems in meta-ethics, semantics, and the philosophy of language. The apparent dual nature of the words—they seem both to describe and to evaluate or express—seemed to make them an excellent test bed for investigations of non-truth-conditional aspects of meaning, of certain types of moral language, of Fregean “coloring,” and of hybrid or “thick” terms, among other things. There are some writers who take slurs purely as a topical jumping-off point for addressing those issues and don't make any explicit effort to bring their discussions back to the social questions that drew scholars' attention to the words in the first place. But most

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<sup>1</sup> That isn't to say that scholars have ignored the sorts of words we now describe as slurs. They've long been grist for philologists and dialectologists (a well-known example is H.L. Mencken's “Designations for Colored Folk,” which appeared in 1944 in *American Speech* (Mencken 1944)). Slurs have also figured in work on racist and homophobic discourse by linguists, sociologists and social psychologists. But until recently, the subject has played little role in semantic theory. Derogatives first made their way into the philosophical literature in 1973, when Dummett (Dummett 1993) used them to exemplify the difference between the grounds for applying a concept and the consequences of its application, but his focus wasn't on slurs as a social phenomenon.

seem to feel that their research ought to have some significance beyond the confines of the common room.

That double perspective can leave us a little wall-eyed, as we try to track slurs as both a social and linguistic phenomenon. The distinction between the two perspectives isn't always obvious. To listen to the way people talk about slurs and to judge from the number of papers, conference sessions and special journal numbers with "slur" in their title, people often assume that slurs are an essentially linguistic rather than rhetorical category—that *slur* is a term more like "proper name" or "factive verb" than it is like "euphemism" or "jargon." So it's worth bearing in mind that the slur as such is a fairly recent addition to both our common metalanguage and our moral inventory. Of course languages like English have a long history of words that disparage people on the basis of their membership in a certain group (though as the sociologist Irving Allen (Allen 1983) noted, the proliferation of ethnic derogations is chiefly a modern urban development). But before the mid-twentieth century there was no one English term that gathered such words as a class. One could describe them only with elastic labels like "derogatory," "abusive," or "pejorative," whose various equivalents (e.g., *dépréciatif*, *abschätzig*, *spregiativo*) are still the only terms available in most other languages for words like these. It was only in the 1960's that the noun *slur* itself became generally accepted as a term for a particular kind of derogative word, rather than simply as "an insulting or disparaging remark or innuendo," as in "the accusation of theft was a slur on my honor"—still the only definition that Merriam-Webster gives for the relevant sense of the noun<sup>2</sup>.

The new use of *slur* was part of the new vocabulary of race and social diversity that entered public discourse in the 1950s and 1960s: notions like "colorblind," "hate speech," "racial sensitivity," and "racism" itself, all of them connected to a sweeping revision of the framework of civic virtue.<sup>3</sup> The new framework implied a doctrine of linguistic self-determination, which

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<sup>2</sup> The linguistic sense of *slur* (as in "a four-letter slur") shows up earlier in the African American press of the 1940s and 1950s, but it wasn't mainstreamed until the 1960s. The phrase "racial slur" appeared just 17 times before 1960 in the publications in Proquest's newspaper and magazine corpus, and the majority of those instances referred to slights or disparagements, rather than to specific words—a judge's observation that a white male defendant who had lived with a colored woman was beyond rehabilitation, a baseball player remark about watermelons in connection with Jackie Robinson. The phrase appeared 126 times in the 1960s, 400 times in the 1970s and 2015 times in the 1980s, almost always in reference to a derogatory word or expression.

<sup>3</sup> Some of these words originated well before this period but were rarely used in the language of public life. Others, like *slur*, acquired new senses; *bias*, for example, was no longer restricted to a

entails that every group should have the right to determine what it should—and, more important, should not—be called, with *slur* the name we now give to certain infractions of that doctrine. That isn't to say that slurs and related concepts required new words to express them. The appearance of a new moral vocabulary was a sign of their emergence, not a precondition for it. There have been parallel cultural developments in many other Western nations, some marked by the introduction of new words, some by the repurposing or redefinition of old ones.<sup>4</sup> But the emergence of *slur* in Anglophone cultures puts the conceptual revisions in relief.

Like those other terms, *slur* is one of those culturally saturated keywords—words that are “strong, difficult, and persuasive,” as Raymond Williams (Williams 1976) described them—that cry out for thick description. The word is both more specific and more value-laden than a term like *derogative*, in three connected ways. For one thing, a derogative word qualifies as a slur only when it disparages people on the basis of properties such as race, religion, ethnic or geographical origin, gender, sexual orientation or sometimes political ideology—the deep fatalities that have historically been the focus of discrimination or social antagonisms that we see as rents in the fabric of civil society. Sailing enthusiasts deprecate the owners of motor craft as “stinkpotters,”

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mental disposition, but could refer to active discrimination, as in “housing bias.” *Racism* itself underwent a similar shift. The 1989 OED definition read “The theory that distinctive human characteristics and abilities are determined by race”; the 2008 revision added “prejudice, discrimination, or antagonism directed against people of other racial or ethnic groups.” (On the evolution of this term, see, e.g. (Miles 2004), (Garcia 1996)).

<sup>4</sup>Making allowances, we find similar attitudes toward certain derogative words in other Western language communities, whether or not they have a specific word that corresponds to *slur*. Italian philosophers and linguists have published papers with titles such as “La Semantica Multi-Atto Degli Slur” (Tenchini and Frigerio 2014) and “Slurs: Un'introduzione” (Bianchi to appear). We can read in those titles not just an acknowledgment that *slur* has no precise translation in Italian, where such items are usually described with the more general *spreghiativi*, but also that *slur* has an application in that language even so. One indirect sign of the diffusion of these concepts is the wide cross-linguistic use of the phrase “politically correct,” either under its English name or others like “rectitude politique,” which signals a similar reaction to the perceived excesses that a reflexive avoidance of words that might be construed as slurs can lead to. Perhaps more basic are the parallel meaning changes that the term racism and its cognates have undergone just about all of these languages.

but we probably wouldn't call the word a slur—though the right-wingers' derogation of environmentalists as "tree-huggers" might qualify, since that antipathy has a partisan cast.

Second, unlike *derogative*, *slur* is a hybrid word (Bernard Williams' "thick term") that mixes categorization and attitude, like *bigot*, *boor*, or *toady*. We might speak of a word for the members of a group as derogative even if we personally think they merit derogation, such as the label *clamheads* for Scientologists or the French *facho* for fascists. But most of us would demur from calling either word a slur, since we feel the groups have it coming. When someone writes "neocon is a slur for Conservatives," we don't have to read further to surmise that she considers the label unfair.

The third distinctive feature of slurs is connected to the first two. Because we see slurs as the expressions of antipathies that are the appropriate objects of civic concern, they count as a distinct kind of social transgression. To describe a word as a slur isn't just to say that it's offensive, but to assign a particular moral or political tenor both to the offense it gives and the offense one commits in uttering it. Using a slur isn't simply a breach of personal manners or a sign of coarseness, which is the grounds on which white critics condemned the use of *nigger* in the nineteenth century. For us, a slur is a kind of verbalized thought-crime: it perpetuates social inequities, infects even innocent minds, and undermines the conduct of public discourse. And as such, slurring—the verb, too, acquired a new sense around this time—becomes a speech act in which institutions and the law may take an official interest.<sup>5</sup>

In that sense, the slur as such is a new addition to the moral or at least civic life. To say that *nigger* was a racial slur in Mark Twain's time or that *Sassenach* was a slur for an Englishman in the age of Walter Scott is not just a linguistic anachronism but a cultural one. It would be like describing Lovelace's violation of Clarissa as date rape or taxing Lear's daughters with ageism—or to take Lionel Trilling's example, like accusing Achilles of being insincere in his boasts. Not that those actions wouldn't merit reproach, but the contemporary words diagnose them in terms of an inapposite moral frame.

### ***The Risks of Reduction***

For all their cultural particularities, slurs clearly rely on some more general linguistic ploy or device—it's not as if the possibility of using words to disparage people in virtue of the

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<sup>5</sup> As the Washington Supreme Court put it in 1977, "racial epithets which were once part of common usage may not now be looked upon as 'mere insulting language.'" 88 Wash. 2d 735, 565 P.2d 1173 (1977)(en banc).

groups they belong to didn't arise until modern English developed an app for them. That's the mechanism that semanticists want to explain, abstracted from the specific features that lead people to classify certain of its applications as slurs. As a purely linguistic process, it certainly isn't going to be restricted to words that derogate only certain kinds of social groups, much less to the words that do so unreasonably or to the kinds of words whose use strikes us as a matter for civic concern. But our specific conception of slurs has become so much a part of the cultural wallpaper that many writers fail to see how local and ideologically charged it is. That often leads them to essentialize the features that lead us to classify certain derogative words as slurs, so that slurs-as-we-think-of-them come to seem a linguistic natural kind. When you see someone using "slur" to describe a general linguistic phenomenon, the problem isn't usually that the word is being used polysemously, but that it isn't—people don't notice that there's a distinction to be made here. That can create a deceptive impression of explanatory harmony between semantics and cultural criticism, as if we could read the moral implications of using the words straight off their lexical surface.

It would probably help to clarify things if we reserved *slur* for the sorts of words that count as slurs in English, along with the analogous words that people in other modern societies classify in a similar category. Then we might use *derogative* for the general linguistic type of which slurs are a particular instance. That's what I'll do here, when it's appropriate, though I'll suggest later that the mechanism at work here isn't restricted to words that convey a negative evaluation of their referents. But the confusion here isn't simply terminological. Whether semanticists describe the object of their inquiry as slurs or as derogatives, pejoratives or epithets, they almost always identify that object with the particular set of words that *slur* picks out. When it comes to exemplifying the phenomenon, for example, they most often fasten on one or two culturally prototypical derogations based on race, ethnicity or sexual orientation, or the circumspect meta-slur S\*, which stands in for some "odious racial slur" (Richard 2008). The assumption is that the characteristic features of *nigger* or *faggot*, say, are going to be representative of the important features of derogatives in general. In their practice, most writers seem to agree with McCready that "pejoratives behave more or less alike in terms of their basic meanings, differing only in the degree of approbation assigned to the individual or group under discussion" (McCready 2010).

This approach reflects a *deformation professionnelle* that manifests itself in a kind of methodological incuriosity, where aspects of the phenomena that seem inessential are either marginalized or neglected. There has been very little discussion of other kinds of derogative

words, for example, though those seem to undermine some of the claims that people make on the basis of observations about prototypical ethnic slurs and the like.<sup>6</sup> Someone says “That building is full of flacks [publicists]” or “Mes collègues sont tous fachos” or complains that the neighborhood is filling up with techies (in present-day San Francisco, a derogative for the overpaid tech workers who are driving up rents). I don’t think many people would want to argue that those utterances aren’t truth-evaluable, or that they’re purely expressive, or that they’re useless to us, all claims that people have made about words like *nigger*. Not that the claims about the use of that word are wrong—that’s another question—but they seem to apply only to words that convey unfounded or indefensible contempt for the members of a racial or ethnic group, which make for a poor candidate for a universal linguistic type.

That isn’t the only kind of variation that has been slighted in the literature. As McCready’s remark suggests, writers realize that the slurs for different groups may vary in intensity according to the degree of abuse or discrimination each has endured, so that slurs for blacks are generally more offensive than those for Frenchmen, say. But no one has had much to say about the differences among slurs for a single group, other than to suggest they may differ in intensity. There’s nothing in anyone’s account of *nigger* that might provide a point of comparison for other slurs for blacks, such as *coon*, *spade* or *jungle bunny*, though these are different from one another in more than just their relative intensity. Nor is there anything in those accounts there might explain how whites’ slurs for blacks are *functionally* different from blacks’ slurs for whites, as some empirical research seems to suggest (Embrick and Henricks 2013). In fact even the very notion of *whites’* slurs for blacks isn’t often expressed—nor, what’s more striking, is the idea that such slurs might be expressions of the notion of whiteness itself. Writers focus almost entirely on what slurs convey about their targets and the insult or offense they give, not on what they have to say about the groups that coin and use them, though those group-identifying or group-affiliating uses are more prevalent, more universal, and arguably prior to their uses as terms of direct abuse. The motivations of the people who use slurs are pretty much discharged by describing the prototypical speaker as “the racist.”

I don’t mean to suggest that writers are unaware of all these points. Many touch on one or more them in passing. But there’s a widespread assumption that we can abstract away from these matters and reduce slurs to their semantic kernel, leaving it to pragmatics and sociolinguistics to

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<sup>6</sup> An exception is Bach (Bach 2014) who elaborates a vocabulary of different types of evaluative words but without distinguishing, e.g., between slurs other hybrid terms.

fill in their broader cultural and social implications and background. That assumption enables semanticists to come at the phenomenon with familiar methods, building their arguments by appeals to intuitions about the meaning or acceptability of the sorts of constructed sentences that live out their entire lives on scholars' blackboards. The idea is that we can intuitively assess what is meant by sentences like *Germans are boches* or *There are Ss\* in that building* in the same way we can with sentences about farmers beating their donkeys, simply by burrowing down into our own idiolects. And with the range of relevant data so constricted, it's not always clear what would count as an empirical disconfirmation of one or another theory of these words, beyond appeals to intuitions about other constructed examples.

One obvious difficulty here is that, as a rule, these words are happily alien to most of the philosophers and linguists who write about slurs: they don't use them and rarely frequent the sorts of people who do.<sup>7</sup> It's only at the risk of presumption that we academics can assume we can intuitively assess what someone who describes his neighborhood as filling up with spics has precisely in mind, or why he's putting things that way. And while intuitions are useful shortcuts for getting at semantic properties such as scope, they can play us false even there. The judgments about decontextualized examples like "If I were racist, I probably wouldn't like niggers" and "I used to think kikes were bad" may lead us to conclude that slurs invariably scope out or are invariably speaker-oriented. But it isn't at all hard to find lots of counterexamples in the field: "Everybody loves to hate a homo," the gay playwright Harvey Fierstein said on MSNBC. One might claim that such a sentence is atypical, but on what grounds? As sociolinguists have shown, speakers are not terribly good at making judgments about such things as typicality; that's a statistical claim that depends on how we determine the baseline and expected frequency, which isn't all obvious here.

Actually, though, the problem isn't so much that slurs don't belong to most scholars' idiolects; it's that where slurs are concerned, there really are no idiolects. You can't secure a judgment about slurs against criticism by confining it to "what the word means for me." What we are reporting when we offer judgments about sentences containing slurs are just unacknowledged ethnographic hypotheses, very often drawn from second-hand accounts and colored by ideology and cultural preconceptions. If we don't immediately notice this, it's partly we're none of us immune to those preconceptions and partly because the data we consider are so reduced and circumscribed that they rarely force us to confront complications or disconfirming phenomena.

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<sup>7</sup> I'm talking about the strong ethnic and racial slurs, not derogatives like *techie* or *flack*.

These methodological limitations come at a cost. We can come away from much of this literature having learned not much more about slurs, or about racism, than we thought we already knew going in—we're rarely surprised by it. So while I'm not averse to appealing to these methods where appropriate, I want to augment them here with a different line of approach. In fact I don't think that slurring is a semantic phenomenon in the first place. What makes the phenomenon interesting, over and above its independent sociopolitical importance, is that it opens a window on aspects of language use and of the sociolinguistic organization of languages that have seemed marginal to the questions at the heart of semantics and pragmatics.

This essay is going to be philologically thick, so to speak. One of my objects here is to widen the range of explicanda, in the hope that our theorizing about slurs will benefit from a more challenging selectional environment. That includes not just the phenomena I mentioned above that writers tend to pass over, but others that no one seems to have noticed. What should we say about words which we count as slurs but which none of their users regard as negative or derogative? How does it happen that there are groups and social categories that are often regarded with antipathy or disrespect but for whom there are no common Standard English slurs—that is, words that express a negative attitude toward the entire class? (Muslims are one such group; women are another.) To this end, I'm going to spread the net more widely and dip into the history and social background of particular words in more anecdotal detail than these discussions typically do. Most of these are particular to American English, and I'll sometimes appeal to some fairly subtle connotations and distinctions, for which I'll have to ask for the indulgence of nonnatives. I'm not offering an account of contemporary American slurs as such; you can't build sociolinguistics in one country. But it's difficult to say anything definitive about slurs in general without saying a good deal about particular slurs in their cultural settings.

## **Semanticizing Slurs**

### ***Slurring meanings***

Virtually all accounts of slurs try to answer several questions. First, what do the words convey, over and above identifying their referents as members of the relevant group? Do they impute certain stereotypical properties to the members of group, or do they describe or express the speaker's attitude toward members of the group, or do they do something else? Call this the question of import. And whichever it is, how do certain strong slurs come by their power to inflict injury on their targets or to evoke anger of such intensity that courts have sometimes assigned them to a legally distinct category of "fighting words"? Call this the question of impact.

Then there's the related question of mechanism: how do the words convey their import? In almost all accounts of slurs, the mechanism is made part of the words' conventional linguistic meanings, whether as additional descriptive content, as a conventional implicature or as a presupposition, which serves to distinguish a slur semantically from a non-slurring descriptive equivalent. (There are few exceptions, such as Anderson and Lepore's (Anderson and Lepore 2013) "prohibition" theory and Bolinger's Contrastive Choice Account (Bolinger 2015), which I'll discuss later.) This semanticist hypothesis, or if you prefer, this family of semanticist hypotheses, has largely circumscribed the discussions of these words. People debate whether this or that mechanism is best suited to produce the effects associated with the words and to predict their apparent idiosyncrasies, but without stepping outside the basic assumption that the conventional meaning of the word itself is what makes it the bearer of the attitude that speakers use it to convey.<sup>8</sup>

On the face of things, the semanticist view seems not only plausible but inevitable. If *(American) Indian* and *redskin* denote the same group of people but consistently convey different attitudes toward them or beliefs about them, how could that be anything but a consequence of a difference in their conventional meanings? And having accepted that conclusion, it seems natural to go on to assimilate slurs and words like them to other words whose conventional meanings convey evaluations or connotations, or alternatively to expressives, words and constructions that conventionally indicate heightened emotional states. But semanticism is an empirical claim about the use and interpretation of these words, and I'll be arguing here that it's wrong, on several grounds. Broadly speaking, semanticist accounts introduce formal mechanisms which have no functional motivation and which don't account either for the way the words are actually used or for their effects on their targets or on other members of the communities they belong to.

### ***Sketch of an Alternative***

Without getting too far ahead of myself, let me say a word about the alternative account of slurs I'll be offering here. From a semantic point of view, I'm proposing as minimal a story as

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<sup>8</sup> To speak of semanticist theories isn't to say that the import of a slur couldn't also depend on additional pragmatic inferences. One could reserve the term "semantic theories" for those which hold that the derogatory content of a slur affects the truth-conditions of the sentences in which it appears, as Sennet and Copp (Sennet and Copp 2014) do, or equivalently, that it constitutes part of what Potts (Potts 2005) calls the "at issue" content of a sentence. In that case, though, to say that an account of slurs is nonsemantic is to leave open whether the derogation follows from a linguistic convention or arises from a conversational inference, which is precisely the question I want to raise here.

one could tell. Slurs and words like them are just plain vanilla descriptions like *cowboy* and *coat hanger*, no different in any semantic respect from their non-slurring equivalents. There's nothing in their linguistic meanings that conveys any disparagement of their referents, whether as content, conventional implicature, presupposition, "coloring" or mode of presentation. As plain descriptions, they have nothing in common with hybrid words that mix categorization and attitude, such as *bigot*, *boor*, or *toady*, or as I noted, the label *slur* itself. Nor is there anything in the meanings of slurs that makes them the direct expressions of strong emotion. That is, they don't share any *semantic* properties with items like vulgarities and interjections—they may sometimes engender analogous kinds of discomfort in listeners, but for independent reasons. As plain descriptions, moreover, they figure in the truth-conditions of the sentences that they appear in exactly as their nonslurring equivalents do: the sentence *The krauts won the cup* says neither more nor less about the world than *The Germans won the cup*. And just to round out the picture, although a few of these words have become phonetically toxic, their effects and behavior owe virtually nothing to any blanket proscriptions on their use.

I'll be arguing, rather, that the effects of words like *redskin* and *kraut* are the results of a routinized conversational implicature, an exploitation of Grice's Maxim of Manner or analogous conversational principles. In particular, the implicature plays off a submaxim of the form "Use appropriate language." That would cover not just the requirement of using English among Anglophones and French among Francophones, which is usually just the limiting case of avoiding obscurity, but the need to use an appropriate register—for example, to avoid describing someone's behavior as egregious in an informal context, or as crummy in a formal one. Beyond that, it implies an obligation to make appropriate choices among the welter of conventions that might govern the choice of words in a given speech situation, depending on the social norms that are contextually pertinent. Opting out of these maxims can set up various conversational implicatures. I'll argue that *redskin* is distinguished from *Indian* not by any additional evaluative or expressive features of its meaning, but merely in being the description of Indians prescribed by the conventions of a group whose members have disparaging attitudes about American Indians. Then the implications of pointedly choosing to use *redskin* arise not from the meaning of the word but from its association with the discourse of a certain group of speakers. In a nutshell, that's what sets this account apart from semanticist theories that try to pack the effects of these words into their conventional meanings. In a nutshell: racists don't use slurs because they're derogative; slurs are derogative because they're the words that racists use.

I'll be focusing here on slurs and analogous derogative terms. But once we accept that slurs are just descriptions that have no distinctive semantic properties, we aren't going to see them as a natural linguistic category nor can they be lumped with expressives, hybrid terms or other categories that convey an evaluation or an attitude via their conventional meanings. Rather, the recognition of slurs as a distinct class has to be made on sociopragmatic grounds, grouping slurs with other words whose extra-denotative import results from an exploitation of the same conversational maneuver that gives slurs their effect. This category of expressions I'll describe as prejudicials, a class of words that turns out to be quite broad. It includes not just most racial and ethnic slurs, but derogatives that disparage people for their occupations, like *flack* and *shyster*; for their avocations, like the French *tou-tou* for tourists and the sailor's *stinkpotter* for motor boat owners; for their geographical origin, like *Canuck* for Canadians or the Italian *terrone* for southerners; for their social status, like *bougie* and *pleb*; or for their political orientation, like *commie*, *lib-lab*, French *facho* for fascists, *Trots* for Trotskyists and what Republicans like to style as "the Democrat Party." There are prejudicial proper names, such as La La Land for Los Angeles, Dubya for George W. Bush, and a whole phonebook of soubriquets for Barack Obama, including Obumma, Oblowme, Obozo, and just BHO. There are political prejudicials, both negative and positive, such as *socialistic*, *death tax* for the estate tax and *free enterprise* for market capitalism. There are hypocoristics that convey affection, such as the Chicago Cubbies, dysphemisms like *Yalie*, and euphemisms like *senior citizen*.<sup>9</sup> As we'll see, all of these items pattern with slurs in ways that make them distinct from words that convey an evaluation via their linguistic meanings. I don't claim that prejudicials as such constitute a universal category; that would entail the universality of both the conversational maneuver that creates them and the conception of societally divided opinion that it exploits. But the phenomenon is very general in the languages of socially complex speech-communities.

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<sup>9</sup> One could argue that in some of these cases the evaluation follows entirely from the descriptive content of the term: what could *Obozo* or *stinkpotter* be but derogatives? But the line is fuzzy, and most of these descriptions underdetermine the precise evaluation they convey. There's nothing in the compositional meaning of the phrase *free enterprise* that tells us it's associated with the political right. *Cubbies* expresses affection for the Chicago Cubs, but *Yalies* is traditionally a derisive term for Yale students and alumni (Lassila 2009). BHO is disparaging, unlike FDR and JFK.

## Critique of Semanticist Accounts

### *Import as Content*

The questions of import and mechanism are by no means the only ones one should be asking about words like these, as we'll see later on. But because it's on these issues that most accounts have concentrated their attention, they're the obvious points of departure for a critique of semantic theories that will set up the pragmatic theory I'm going to develop. And while most writers blend their accounts of mechanism and import, it will be convenient here to deal with each of these issues separately.

Some semanticist accounts of slurs hold that their import arises from representing their targets in some ways, either by imputing a stereotype to them or depicting them as despicable. The most straightforward way of incorporating this material, and perhaps the one that accords most easily with naïve intuition, is simply to add the descriptive content to what one asserts in using the term. This is the approach developed by Hom (Hom 2008), who packs the meaning of the term with both a stereotype and its social 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 Hom to the morally satisfying conclusion that to describe someone as a chink is necessarily to make a false assertion, because there are no chinks; the word has an empty extension. In a sparer version of this approach, Hom and May (Hom and May 2013), (Hom and May 2014) assign to the sentence "X is a chink" a meaning like "X ought to be the object of negative moral evaluation just because they are Chinese." The disparaging sense of *chink* remains part of the content of the assertion, however, so that "X is a chink" and "X is Chinese" have different truth-conditions.

The Hom-May position is subject to several kinds of objections. First, and to my mind most telling, it doesn't capture the way these words are actually used. By and large, a speaker who uses a slur isn't asserting anything about the group the word refers to, other than in the prototypical but rare cases where someone is actually venting his hostility toward one of its members. A man who tells his wife, "I'll pick up some dinner from the chinks on Church Street" isn't trying to communicate anything about what Chinese people are like or what he thinks about them—what would that have to do with the point of the utterance? You may be able to infer something about what he thinks about the Chinese, or perhaps more likely, about what passes for

common wisdom about the Chinese in his social circle. But none of that is part of the content of what he said, whether at-issue or not.

A second group of objections to these approaches is more purely mechanical, and involves the interaction of slurs with various operators (see among others (DiFranco 2014), (Jeshion 2013b), (Sennet and Copp 2014) and (Rappaport)). The Hom-May thesis fails to explain why slurs are offensive even when their content is not asserted, as in conditionals such as “If a chink applies for the job, tell him it’s filled” or in negated sentences like “There are no chinks in the class.”<sup>10</sup> It leads to awkward conclusions about the truth-conditions of negated sentences. If *kike* has a null extension, then as Rappaport observes, the Nazi concentration camp commandant who tells a war crimes tribunal “I never killed any kikes” can’t be accused of perjury. And as Sennet and Copp note, this position entails that “All kikes are Mormons” is necessarily true.

Moreover, this view leaves us wondering why one can’t directly contest the description of someone as a chink or a kraut by denying the aptness of the stereotype that the word putatively conveys. Under normal circumstances, “Oskar isn’t a kraut” can only mean that Oskar isn’t German, not that he’s not cruel.<sup>11</sup> Potts (Potts 2005) describes this phenomenon by saying that the

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<sup>10</sup> Hom and May argue that the offensiveness of sentences like this can be explained via a conversational implicature: in saying “if a chink applies for the job...” or “there are no chinks in my class,” the speaker implicates that there are Chinese who deserve to be the target of negative moral evaluation because of being Chinese, since to use a predicate is to imply that it has a non-null extension. That assumption is dubious; as Rappaport points out, it would entail that the parent who tells a child, “There are no monsters in the closet” believes in the existence of monsters. And even if the assumption were plausible, it would not only entail, implausibly, that the offensive effects of the sentences “There are kikes in the building” and “There are no kikes in the building” have different sources, one semantic and one pragmatic. (See Jeshion (Jeshion 2013b)).

<sup>11</sup> I say “under normal circumstances” because a slur can sometimes acquire a transferred meaning in which it denotes only those members of the group who share the negative properties stereotypically assigned to the group—what Rappaport (Rappaport ms) calls the “stereotype essentializing” uses of the terms. That’s what makes possible such utterances as “He’s a gentile but not a goy,” headlines such as “DC’s PR Luminaries Explain Why ‘I’m Not a Flack’” and Chris Rock’s riff on the difference between blacks and niggers. In these cases, however, the word is no longer functioning as a slur for the group as a whole, but rather as a hybrid term for certain of its members, so that the stereotypical properties implied by its use as a slur become part of its lexical meaning. Thus one could say, “Oskar isn’t one of those krauts—he’s actually easygoing and kind,” where *kraut* is functioning as a hybrid term for those Germans who are cruel or brutal. (Note that this essentialization is a general characteristic of the extended uses of words: the pragmatic

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.

### *Slurs as Conventional Implicatures*

One way to avoid some of these consequences is to bury the stereotype associated with a derogative in a conventional implicature, as a number of people have proposed.<sup>12</sup> One can understand the motivation here. Conventional 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 wealthy but a Republican” might make a true statement about Anna’s wealth and political allegiance yet also convey the dubious 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. This approach has other advantages. It seems to explain why such stereotypes are impervious to negation. The

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connotations attached to *tiger* as the name a feline become part of its semantics when it is used to denote a person who is fierce and determined.)

The failure to recognize this distinction has led to a lot of confusion. In defense of their theory that *Jew* and *kike* have distinct lexical meanings, Horn and May (Horn and May 2013) point to the nonequivalence of “Kikes are supposed to be Jews that are bad” and “Jews are supposed to be Jews that are bad.” That example does indeed show that *kike* and *Jew* have different lexical meanings in this context, but if *kike* means “Jews that are bad,” it denotes a subset of Jews, not the entire kind. *Kike* has the same hybrid meaning in a sentence like “Jews are all kikes,” which a more judicious anti-Semite might counter by saying, “No, some are generous and honest.”

In actual usage, sentences asserting the identity of bare plurals, such as “Jews are kikes” or “The Chinese are chinks” are invariably used to make metalinguistic assertions, e.g.:

γ Japanese are nippers, Vietnamese are gooks, Filipinos are flips, Chinese are chinks or chinamen. Get your slurs straight.

(In this paper I follow Horn (Horn 2013) in using “γ” to indicate a Googled example.) There is no evidence that anyone has ever used such a sentence in the wild to assert the identity of two kinds, e.g., as in “Cougars are pumas.” It isn’t clear what it could mean.

<sup>12</sup> Among those who have advocated or entertained this view are (Boisvert 2008) (Williamson 2009), (Copp 2001), (Hay 2011), (McCready 2010) and (Whiting 2013). Potts (Potts 2007, 2012) has developed an explicit framework for representing conventional implicatures of this type, but what is conveyed, on his view, is the expressive content of the term rather than a descriptive stereotype. (It should also be noted that Potts himself has less to say about slurs than others who have cited his work in this connection.)

negative implications of using *boche* survive when one says “Oskar is not a boche,” in the same way the contrary-to-expectations implication established by *but* is preserved when we say “It’s not true that Mary is wealthy but a Republican.”

I see two kinds of problems with this approach. One is conceptual: why would ethnic and racial stereotypes work their way into the semantics of these terms in just this form? What could it be about the word *boche* that makes it semantically more like *but* than like *German*—not just in having a different lexical meaning, but a different kind of meaning?<sup>13</sup> Are there other kinds of descriptions that have this feature? If so, why not—what do these quirks of meaning and use have to do with derogative words and the practices that surround them? That doesn’t mean by itself that the view is wrong, but only that it’s incomplete.

The other objections are mechanical, and apply to not just to CI accounts but to all representationalist accounts, whether the stereotype or descriptive import is made part of the at-issue content or a conventional implicature. Proponents of both of those approaches have observed that the stereotype associated with a slur need not necessarily apply to everyone in the target category. An individual might be exempted: “He’s a chink, yeah, but he’s terrible at math, he’s a careful driver and his collars are always dirty.” In advocating the CI view, Williamson (Williamson 2009) suggests that *boche* implies only a tendency for Germans to be cruel: “A xenophobe may easily say ‘He’s a Boche, but he’s not cruel—he’s one of the few decent ones.’” (Camp (Camp 2013) and Tirrell (Tirrell 1999) make the same observation.) But on these analyses, it’s not clear *why* this should be so. After all, the conventional implicature associated with *but* doesn’t indicate that the relation signaled by “A but B” is *typically* contrary to expectations. What’s more, even the generic condition is too restrictive; as Camp (Camp 2013) notes, many slurs appear to permit the denial of any negative feeling. Someone could say, “You

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<sup>13</sup> Some have assumed that this is the sort of analysis required by Frege’s examples of “coloring,” in order to explain the difference between using *dog* and *cur* in “The dog/cur howled all night.” But as Picardi (Picardi 2006) points out, there’s no reason to suppose that *dog* and *cur* (or *Hund* and *Köter*) are in fact synonymous. One can deny that one’s dog is a cur without denying that it is a dog, whereas one can’t ordinarily deny that one’s neighbor is a boche without also denying that he is German. By way of analogy, suppose my neighbor parks his new Mercedes in front of my driveway and I say to him, “Would you mind moving your jalopy so I can get my car out of the garage?” You wouldn’t conclude that *jalopy* was a negatively colored synonym for *automobile*, rather than a name for a battered old car; I’m just indulging in a little neighborly meiosis. Richard makes this same point using the example of someone who refers to his horse as a nag in a jocular way (Richard 2008).

know, these boches get a bum rap. They're actually a kind and clement people, if a bit impetuous and disorganized." Granted, that would be unexpected thing for someone who refers to the Germans as boches to say. But the statement isn't semantically contradictory, the way it would be if the speaker said "The boches come from Italy." We wouldn't say the speaker is misusing *boche* or is confused about its meaning. The most one can say, then, is that *boche* is typically used to convey that Germans are typically cruel. But that sounds a lot more like a cultural association than a lexical meaning. The fact is that the sentence "Oskar is a boche" doesn't say anything categorical about the properties of either Oskar in particular or Germans in general.

The second mechanical point that counts against the CI approach is connected to the previous one. Since words like *boche* and *chink* don't necessarily impute any specific properties to the group they refer to, such properties can be informatively predicated of the terms. If cruelty were actually inherent in the linguistic meaning of *boche*, whether as content or a conversational implicature, then an assertion of "The boches are cruel" (or "inhuman" or "brutal," etc.) would strike us as conversationally tautological, but it doesn't.<sup>14</sup> 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 go without saying. Someone who speaks of free enterprise presumably holds that market capitalism is the fairest and most productive economic system, but we don't sense a tautology when someone asserts that claim outright. Some of those properties may be hovering in the background when you use a prejudicial, but they aren't part of the semantics of the word, which is why they can be explicitly reinforced, like other conversational implicatures. As Sadock (Sadock 1978) notes: "Since conversational implicatures are not part of the conventional import of utterances, it should be possible to make them explicit without being guilty of redundancy." In this regard prejudicials contrast with the hybrid words with which they're often lumped, where the evaluation is genuinely part of the word's meaning and hence can't be nonredundantly predicated of it. Utterances like "Toadies are obsequious," "Fleecing someone is unfair" and "Shrill sounds are unpleasant" are likely to elicit the reaction "So what else is new?"<sup>15</sup>

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<sup>14</sup> As Jeshion (Jeshion 2013a) crisply observes, "'Chinks should be subject to higher admissions standards' is not an analytic truth."

<sup>15</sup> Many of the arguments I've offered here apply as well to accounts that treat the import of slurs as semantic presuppositions, such as by Schlenker (Schlenker 2007) and Cepollaro (Cepollaro 2015). For example, if *commie* presupposed the deviousness of communists, then "Commies are devious" should sound redundant, in the same way that "John stopped beating his wife, and he

These two features—the possibility of denying the putative stereotypes and the possibility of explicitly reinforcing them—provide a useful diagnostic for distinguishing slurs and other prejudicials from hybrid words that convey their evaluations semantically. That boundary is easy to lose sight of, particularly when it comes to pejorative terms. There are a number of pejorative hybrid words that are linked to categories like race, gender or ethnicity, such as *Uncle Tom* for a black person who behaves obsequiously toward whites, *slut*, JAP (*Jewish-American princess*) for a spoiled Jewish woman, and *wetback* for an illegal Mexican migrant. These words are often described as slurs, and they unquestionably draw on the same kinds of social attitudes that words like *coon*, *yid* and *beaner* do.<sup>16</sup> But they can't convey a merely generic reading: it would be odd to say, for example, "He's an Uncle Tom, but he's one of the proud and assertive ones," denying the stereotype that the word evokes, in the same way that it would be odd to say "He's a toady, but not a fawning or deferential one," suggesting that servility is only a typical feature of toadies. And there's a sense of redundancy when one explicitly predicates of the term the evaluation or stereotypical content it semantically conveys, as in "JAPs are spoiled" or "Uncle Toms are servile." Note that most of the disparaging words for women that are loosely described as slurs also fall into this group: *bitch* and *slut* are hybrid pejorative words like *idiot* or *asshole*, not prejudicials like *commie* or *nigger*.<sup>17</sup>

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has" does. People have mounted semantic arguments against this view, but I won't go into these here, since I'll be arguing that neither the stereotype nor the attitude associated with a slur can be identified with its conventional meaning in any form. But other arguments against the presuppositional view are less persuasive. Richard (Richard 2011) argues that slurs don't push their content into the conversational background, but rather function to insult the addressee. On the contrary, we'll see that insulting the addressee is not the main purpose of slurs, but only an occasional and relatively rare effect of their use. In fact pushing their implications into the conversational background is exactly what slurs are for, which is what makes them such effective instruments for socializing the members of a group into its communal values, though this isn't a matter of the semantic presuppositions of the words.

<sup>16</sup> People very often use *slur* to cover pejorative hybrid words like these, as well as for other terms that reduce people to their ethnicities or play on ethnic stereotypes—given names like Sambo, Ikey and Hiawatha or expressions like *Indian giver*, *Chinaman's chance* and *Jew down*. It makes perfect sense to extend *slur* in this way, so long as we bear in mind that the different types involve different semantic processes. (Allen (Allen 1983) uses "slurring nicknames" to distinguish the prototypical derogatives like *nigger*, a term that nicely emphasizes that they are pointed alternatives to other word.)

<sup>17</sup> One reason why it's easy to lose sight of the distinction between hybrid terms and prejudicials is that words sometimes migrate from one class to the other. *Bitch* has long been a hybrid

## The Priority of Attitude

One can understand the temptation to say that slurs semantically convey negative stereotypes of their targets. As Dummett (Dummett 1993) 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 an intuitively plausible picture, which is very common in the psychological and sociological literature on slurs. The psychologist Leon Rappoport (Rappoport 2005) describes it thus:

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 cluster of traits assumed to be typical of Hispanics and Jews...

Stereotypes, negative and positive, are among the cognitive shortcuts we rely on to make sense of the world and to guide our responses to it. The utterance of a slur very often evokes or foregrounds a negative stereotype of its target, which is one reason why people use these words: “What do you expect from a \_\_\_\_?” Those stereotypes in turn can serve to legitimate various responses to the group, sometimes by dehumanizing or marginalizing its members, and other times merely allowing us to discount them (when we call a publicist a flack it’s by way of questioning her journalistic integrity, not her basic humanity).

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pejorative for a woman with certain unpleasant characteristics, but in a part of hip hop culture it is also used as a dismissive term for women in general. When 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, with the implication that he doesn’t hold women in high regard. In the first instance you can contest his utterance by rejecting either component; you can say either “That’s not true; you’ve never been out on a date” or “No, your dates were always considerate and good-natured.” 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, it’s true you went out with a lot of women but they were all very nice.” The maliciousness that’s evoked by the hybrid term *bitch* may still be resonating in the background when it’s used as prejudicial (i.e., a slur, in the strict sense I’m using the word here). But it isn’t part of what one asserts with the word. In the same way, when *bitch* is used as a prejudicial 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 category 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 hybrid pejorative. I’ll have more to say about below about why this sort of change hasn’t happened in Standard English.

But as I've shown, those stereotypes can't themselves be part of the conventional semantic content of the term. *Redskin* and (*American*) *Indian* both contain only as much semantic information as is required to pick out their common referent. And however the stereotype is evoked, the relation between slur and stereotype is not as straightforward as Rappoport's remarks suggest. It's misleading to say that "each term [stands] for a specific cluster of traits assumed to be typical" of the targeted group. For one thing, it isn't easy to identify the "negative qualities" from among the various traits that are stereotypically associated with the group. Racial and ethnic stereotypes are rarely categorically negative—they're typically compounded of contrasting or inconsistent traits. As the sociologist Ali Rattansi (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 antithetical features of these stereotypes aren't independent of one other. The positive traits are usually the more genial manifestations of the conflicted racial attitudes that also shape the negative ones. But *chink* doesn't convey any ambivalence about the Chinese; as Jeshion (Jeshion 2013b) 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 seen 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." The same traits that suggest the clannishness of Jews can be cited to testify to their strong sense of family. Whatever ethnic traits a given utterance of the word *chink* or *kike* brings to mind, if any, are usually just those that can be interpreted as contextually consistent with an antecedent attitude of condescension or contempt—though as we saw, one can convey disparagement even while asserting the virtues of the target group. The speaker who says "Whatever you may have heard, the krauts are really a kind and clement people" isn't repudiating the attitude that's implicit in the slur, just contesting the stereotype that other people invoke to justify it.<sup>18</sup>

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<sup>18</sup> Blackburn (Blackburn 1992) misses this point when he writes that while *kraut* is a term of abuse used by some Englishmen for Germans,

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 generally 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.

That's how it is that 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 depraved deviants, as wild-eyed radicals, as Stalin's "rootless cosmopolitans," as Zionist oppressors, and even, in the 1930's, as possessing a duplicitous genius for basketball (a game which "appeals to the Hebrew with his Oriental background," Paul Gallico wrote 1938, because it "places a premium on an alert scheming mind, flashy trickiness, artful dodging and general smart-aleckness" (Sclar and Brook 2008)). But it isn't as if the word has had seven or nine different meanings over the years, or as if there's any semantic misunderstanding between the speaker who denounces kikes with Emma Goldman in mind and the listener who agrees with him while thinking of Goldman Sachs. The animus transcends the specific pretexts we give for it.<sup>19</sup>

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...it is very easy to think of contexts in which it is not that: faced with some marvel of engineering in my new BMW you might shake your head in wonder: 'typical of the krauts to think of that' you say in awe, and all the term does is emphasize a sense of difference, that in turn reinforces the admiration. A few such cases, and the derogatoriness starts to slide into history, while the appreciation of the difference as a positive thing may come to be the default.

But the speaker's admiration for German engineering doesn't suspend the disparagement that is still implicit in *kraut*, though it's no longer colored by fierce belligerence. Compare the adjective *Gallic*, which is airily condescending even when it's being used to praise the French for their charm, their flair or their *savoir-faire*.

<sup>19</sup> As Jeshion (Jeshion 2013b) puts this point:

True, certain derogatives tend to bring specific stereotypes to mind. Sometimes the stereotype is suggested by the name itself, particularly when it's transparently derived from a description—*fairy* for homosexuals, *beaner* for Mexicans. Or sometimes the stereotype is shaped by the particular 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 got it from the French *poilus*. The terms that soldiers apply to the enemy naturally evoke his savagery and inhumanity, rather, say, than his bombastic music or turgid scholarship; that's the theme historically evoked by soldier slang like *Hun*, *jerry*, *Jap* and *gook*. Even then, though, the point of the stereotype is to legitimate a certain attitude: as used by a Tommy, *boche* didn't imply simply that the Germans were cruel, but that their cruelty made them so contemptible as to deserve killing.

### ***What Slurs are For***

The general concern with the injuriousness of slurs had led writers to focus almost exclusively on the effects they can have on their targets, whether by legitimating their exclusion or brutalization or by inducing feelings of helplessness or rage. That's what's implied when slurs are described as “terms of abuse” and Jeshion is getting at when she typologizes the uses of slurs as “weapon” and “non-weapon,” uses, the former derogative uses and the latter reclaimed uses by the groups the words target.<sup>20</sup> As she puts it, it is a fundamental property of slurs that they “function to derogate or dehumanize, by which I mean, that they function to signal that their targets are unworthy of equal standing or full respect as persons, that they are inferior as persons” (Jeshion 2013a); (Bolinger 2015), Richard (Richard 2008) and Croom (Croom 2013) are among others who focus primarily on the use of slurs to offend a targeted addressee. But while it's reasonable to distinguish reclaimed and non-reclaimed uses of slurs, it's misleading to characterize all of the latter in terms of their use as “weapons” or for that matter to say that they're in their nature tools for insulting or offending others. Those are unquestionably among the most troubling effects of

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There are many reasons why bigots take their attitudes to be warranted.... The roots of rationales for anti-Semitism are notoriously multi-faceted but, to be sure, some people hate and hold contempt for Jews, and regard it as warranted, because they are not Christian or because members of more religious branches are insular, and look, act, and dress different.

Hornsby (Hornsby 2001) makes a related point when she notes that “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.”

<sup>20</sup> Jeshion's distinction is echoed by Camp (Camp 2013) and Popa (Popa 2016), among others.

the uses of certain slurs, and I'll return to them at the end of this essay. But the focus on the offensiveness of slurs tends to obscure what is usually their primary *raison d'être*.

We should bear in mind that vast majority of the uses of these words occur among the members of the group they belong to, out of earshot of the people they denote.<sup>21</sup> Indeed, a community may have a slur for a group of people that its members have no expectation of ever encountering. It's safe to assume that there are a lot of languages with slurs for Jews which no Jew has ever heard or is likely to hear, and most of the people who use *redskin* have never to their knowledge met a Native American face-to-face. And to the primary users of a slur—which is to say, those who “own” the word—it's often a matter of indifference how it would actually land in the ear of its target. The person who uses *commie* to refer to communists or loosely to leftists doesn't care whether actual leftists are going to be offended by it. These days, in fact, leftists are more likely to be amused or flattered by the label—there's a brisk trade on the web in t-shirts saying “You say ‘commie’ like it's a bad thing.” (One might point to an obvious exception here in the frequent use of pejoratives for women in direct address with the intent to offend or injure, but these words don't function like prejudicials either semantically or socially, as we'll see below.)

If we want to know what a slur is *for*, we'll need to ask first what it conveys about the members of the group that it belongs to. Those people may use a slur in direct address to put someone it targets in their place, it's true, but the words are far more often used for other reasons: to create solidarity in a common sense of resentment or superiority; to enjoy the complicit schoolyard-variety naughtiness in using forbidden words, particularly in the form of racial or homophobic humor; or to underscore the normative values of the group. Those implications usually arise via the suggestion that the members of the targeted group are unworthy of respect, of course, though the targets may also fill a symbolic role that's largely removed from their actual social presence. Adolescent boys who throw the word *fag* around loosely aren't focused on disparaging homosexual men as such so much as communing with each other over their own macho heterosexuality.<sup>22</sup> Or sometimes, as Jane Hill notes, the use of the words signal a “a tough,

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<sup>21</sup> In a case study of discourse about race among employees at a large Southwestern baked good company, Embrick and Henricks (Embrick and Henricks 2013) note that whites almost never used *nigger* in racially mixed company, confining it to casual conversation with other whites in what Picca and Feagin (Picca and Feagin 2007) call backstage settings.

<sup>22</sup> Croom (Croom 2013) cites a monologue by the comedian Louis C.K.:

hyper-masculine register of American English, where [slurs] are emblematic of straight talk and the right to unconstrained and ‘irreverent’ expression” ((Hill 2009), see also (Eliasoph 1999)).

The point is easiest to see when we focus on slurs that belong to a non-hegemonic subgroup, such the Hawaiian *haole*, black *honky*, Hispanic *gringo*, or *shiksa* as used by American (or Anglophone) Jews. No one would say that the import of *shiksa* was exhausted by saying that it denotes a non-Jewish woman and enumerating the properties that such women are held to possess. One can’t understand the import of the word without understanding something about how Jews see themselves in relation to gentile culture: to its owners, the word says as much about “us” as it does about “them,” and a gentile who uses it will be taken as consciously affiliating him- or herself with a Jewish point of view or identity. But while the use of slurs to mark group identity is obvious enough when the words belong to groups defined in opposition to hegemonic culture, it’s harder to discern when the slur belongs to the hegemonic culture itself. No one would try to describe the import of *honky* without referencing black identity. But when people describe the import of *nigger*, they almost always limit themselves to what it conveys about the speaker’s beliefs or feelings about its target, not about himself. *Nigger* is treated as *the* paramount slur for blacks, rather than as whites’ (or nonblacks’) paramount slur for blacks. Reading through the philosophical and linguistic literature on slurs, you rarely encounter any mention of whiteness or of the other hegemonic categories in terms of which alterities are defined (a notable exception is Hill (Hill 2009)). That isn’t surprising—whiteness is in its nature invisible, unmarked; as Richard Dyer (Dyer 1997) has written, whiteness is the “framing position.” But as the sociologists Joe Feagin, Hernan Vera and Pinar Batur (Feagin, Vera, and Batur 2000) have observed, “racialized attitudes and actions require not only a representation of the stereotyped other but also a representation of oneself.” The very existence of a stereotype for an out-group entails the existence of a corresponding ideal of identity among the people who own it. When you stereotype the members of a group as indolent or greedy, you evoke conceptions of your own group as industrious or generous, each in a rather specific way.

### ***Multiple Slurs for a Single Target***

The significance of the self-affiliating or self-identifying functions of slurs can be easily lost sight of when it comes to arch-slurs such as *nigger*, which seems to be defined simply in

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faggot didn’t mean gay when I was a kid, you called someone a faggot for being a faggot, you know?... I would never call a gay guy a faggot, unless he was being a faggot. But not because he’s gay, you understand

terms of a white (or non-black) identity. But specific subgroups and subcultures of whites (or straights or Christians) can also use other slurs to carve out and reinforce narrower social allegiances and more specific identities, which in turn leads to the existence of multiple slurs for the same target group. That phenomenon has been almost entirely unexplored. Writers sometimes talk about what Hom calls “derogative variation,” but by that they mean that slurs for different groups vary in intensity according to the extent of the discrimination and enmity that the group has faced (see (Hornsby 2001), (Tirrell 1999), (Hom 2008)). This is generally true as far as it goes—in American English, slurs for blacks or Hispanics are going to be stronger than those for Englishmen or white Protestants. But that principle doesn’t explain the differences in tone, affect and intensity among the various disparagements for the same group, such as *nigger*, *coon*, *spade*, *jigaboø*, *spook*, and *jungle bunny* for blacks and *fag(got)*, *queer*, *pansy*, *poof*, *fairy*, *fruit* and *homo* for gays.<sup>23</sup> These words may or may not evoke different stereotypes of their targets. Someone who simply 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*.

But different subgroups may evaluate the very same stereotypes in different ways, each implying a distinct sense of group identity. *Spade*, for example, was the term of choice for blacks among by mid-twentieth-century bopsters and hipsters and later among the hippies (it originated as underworld slang a bit earlier). In a flier by that was circulated in San Francisco’s Haight in 1967, the Beat writer and editor Chester Anderson said: “The spades... 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, *spade* evoked the familiar stereotypes of indolence, insouciance, and drug-use, but in a tone of sentimentalized admiration rather than out-and-out contempt, an expression of the hipster self-image that Norman Mailer described in the title of his famous essay “The White Negro,” which celebrated the attachment to jazz, marijuana, and “cool.”

Within a broad hegemonic culture, multiple slurs for the a single group are often distinguished by the specific social identity that they encode. That’s one reason why there’s so much turnover in the slurs for a particular group (think the passé *nance*, *nellie*, and *pansy* for

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<sup>23</sup> Langton, Anderson, and Haslanger are among those who mention multiple slurs in passing, but only to remark that “there can be variation among slurs for the same group; ‘nigger’ is more offensive than ‘darkie’ or ‘coon,’” as if the difference in offensiveness exhausted the distinctions among the words. (Langton, Anderson, and Haslanger 2013).

homosexuals or *ikey*, *mockie* and *sheenie* for Jews). Like slang, slurs are usually coined by younger speakers to differentiate themselves linguistically from the attitudes of their elders, for which purposes a new proprietary word for blacks or gays can be as useful as one for sex or beer.<sup>24</sup> And it's why slurs often manifest what Irving Allen calls a "low comedy" that enhances their usefulness as tokens of common sensibility—*jungle bunny* and *spearchucker* for blacks, *mackerel-snapper* for Catholics, *greaseball* for Italians, *Buddhahead* for (Hawaiian) Japanese, *Jew canoe* for a Cadillac, and so forth (on the uses of ethnic humor, see (Howitt 2005) (Rappoport 2005)). It's a reminder that the main reason why people coin slurs is to provide pleasure and gratification for their friends rather than to visit humiliation upon their targets.

In fact a great proportion of the active slurs in modern society are relatively short-lived and mutable, along with the social identities they index. They tend to be replaced as the perceptions of their targets change, entailing a change in the group self-conception defined in opposition to the target. *Chink*, for example, has been increasingly set aside as the crude "no tickee no washee" anti-Chinese racism that was dominant in earlier periods yielded to the more decorous anti-Asian racial aversions of modern academic and corporate life. (*Chink* is still heard, but it is far less common in books and newspapers than was in the 1920s.)<sup>25</sup> More recent terms such as *ching-chong* and the pan-Asian *slant* are more expressive of resentment of Asian

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<sup>24</sup> As Allen (Allen 1983) notes modern are usually slang words. Slang is a category that's notoriously hard to pin down, but standard slang dictionaries such as Jonathan's *Historical Dictionary of American Slang* and Jonathon Green's *Dictionary of Slang* list most common slurs, and the words seem to satisfy Otto Jespersen's definition of slang as "something that is willfully substituted for the first word that will present itself" (Jespersen 1922). Still, some slurs, such as *jungle bunny*, are clearly slangier than others, such as *nigger*. Indeed, it's reasonable to assume that *jungle bunny* is more often a substitution for *nigger* than for a nonslurring term like *Negro* or *black*. The slanginess of slurs (as of other words) reflects, among other things, the degree to which they are associated with a specific local subcommunity.

<sup>24</sup> Wescott (Wescott 1971) observes that labio-velar (i.e., noncoronal) obstruents are overwhelmingly predominant in the onsets and codas of derogative words (cf *nigger*, *spook*, *dago*, *chink*, *mick*, *spic*, *redneck*, *gook*, *cracker*, *kraut*, *kike*, *coon*, *dink*, *redskin*, *greaser*, *Ikey*, *honky* with velars; also *wop*, *hebe*, *Jap*, *flip*, *beaner* with labials and *polack*, *frog*, *jig-a-boo*, *wog*, *peckerwood*, *fag* with both). He argues, more speculatively, that this tendency is evident in pejorative and vulgar words in general (cf *punk*, *prick*, *crook*, *boob*, *creep*, etc.) and that it is cross-linguistically associated with derogation and aggression

<sup>25</sup> For more on the complex history of this word, see (Mieder, 1996), (Roy, 2011) and (Wu, 1972). Saka (Saka 2007) notes in passing that *chinaman* is less offensive than *chink*, a difference he lays to the circumstances that have sustained the existence of the each term.

overachievers and the anxiety they induce than the virulent racist Orientalism of earlier eras. Even those few words that have persisted as active slurs since the nineteenth century have changed their import from period to period as speakers reinterpret the words' histories: the modern use of *nigger* reflects a modern conception of whiteness (or really several such conceptions), though as filtered through a historical lens.<sup>26</sup>

### ***The Nonconventionality of Affect***

A full description of the import of any of these words belongs to folklore or ethnography, not to semantics or pragmatics. Thirty years ago, Irving Allen deplored the sociological neglect of the folkloric aspects of this vocabulary:

This vocabulary is too often read only as malice and too seldom as folklore with all the inventiveness, ideological utility, and inadvertent confession of other folklores. I hear in these words more than the din of billingsgate. They are the echoes and re-echoes of historical situations, of issues wrangled over, and of the very incidents of contention. (Allen 1983)

It's clear that one can't decontextualize the import of a word such as *spade*, or for that matter *nigger*, and reduce it to some descriptive content that can be incorporated in the conventional meaning of the term, in whatever form. But what of the affect that the word signals? Could we say, for example, that *spade* is a word denoting blacks that conveys either the speaker's contempt for them or his belief that they warrant it? There are different ways to formulate this approach, which I'll come back to later. But they all come down to claiming that we can associate the use of the word with a particular affect, and for now I'll describe these positions, loosely, as "affectivist."<sup>27</sup>

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<sup>26</sup> Most of the still-potent slurs of modern American life (such as *kike*, *spic*, *wop*, *faggot* and *chink*) were twentieth-century inventions. The nineteenth-century slurs that are still remembered and occasionally heard, such as *mick*, *kraut* and *frog*, generally denote groups toward whom there is now so little real antipathy that there's no incentive to coin new derogatives for them. *Nigger* is the one important exception (*redskin* has been a slur since the nineteenth century but is a special case).

<sup>27</sup> I'll reserve "expressivist" for the view that the utterer of a slur expresses contempt for its target, perhaps together with a second identifying component (the "hybrid expressivism" of Jeshion) and follow Bach (Bach 2014) in using "loaded descriptivism" to describe the position that a slur for N's means something like "N and therefore despicable." What these views have in common is the idea that a slur is conventionally associated with a particular affect, which is the claim I'm taking up in this section. For varieties of these views, see e.g., (McCready 2010), (Saka 2007), (Blackburn 1984), (Richard 2008), and (Jeshion 2013b) among others.) I'll have more to say

One problem here is that many of the same arguments that make a semantic treatment problematic for the descriptive view create problems for affectivist views, as well. Like the stereotypes that the use of a slur can evoke, the affect it conveys can be explicitly reinforced without creating a sense of tautology, which would be puzzling if it were inherent in the term's conventional meaning. An utterance like "Wops are despicable" strikes us as potentially informative, and when someone says, "Ugh, commies—I despise them" we aren't tempted to respond, "Well, duh! Why else would you call them commies?"

But the problems go deeper than that. The feeling-tones that these words convey—the affect they express toward their targets and the sense of common identity that they reinforce—are generally much too nuanced and socially embedded to be rendered in meaning-schemas like "contemptible because Italian" or "Jewish and I despise them for it," which reflect the simplistic picture of the words' effect that's implicit in the term *slur* itself. Could we then get away with saying that *chink* in the mouth of a white Los Angeles policeman in the 1920s expresses the same affect toward the Chinese as *ching-chong* in the mouth of a white female USC student in 2015? Perhaps the conventions for using these words don't have to mention all their social implications; perhaps the conventional meanings provide only summary evaluations like "despicable" or "used to express contempt," or maybe just a bald "negative," while the more nuanced social attitudes are part of what the words pragmatically convey.<sup>28</sup> In this way, the lexical entries for these words might look something like the entries provided by standard dictionaries, which are simply tagged with metadata labels such as "derog." for the benefit of users who are unfamiliar with the term. This is basically the same idea that writers seem to be getting at when they say that the meanings of slurs are equivalent to the meanings of their "neutral" counterparts as modified by  *fucking*, or as accompanied by a raised middle finger or a sneering tone of voice, all of which imply that at its core, all derogation is the result of a single operator.

These claims are more speculative than empirical, even as they regard arch-slurs like *nigger*, and in any case they don't generalize. The affect conveyed by a slur can't always be reduced even to minimal polarities like "negative" and "positive." There are often discrepancies

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about some of these proposals below, when I can contrast them with my own approach.

<sup>28</sup> For example, Bach suggests that "the negative attitude [conventionally associated with the term] should be unspecific enough to be compatible with the property of being any of the following (insofar as these are all distinct from one another): abominable, despicable, detestable, disgusting, inferior, loathsome, offensive, repugnant, subhuman, or vile" and uses "contemptible" only as a stand-in for the terms in that range.

between the evaluation of the referent that users of the word believe they're conveying and the evaluation perceived by the word's targets. What polarity would we assign to the attitude expressed by the hipsters and hippies of the 1950s and 1960s who described blacks as spades, for example? The word certainly wasn't intended contemptuously—Ken Kesey was no doubt speaking for most of his fellow beats and hippies when he described it as a “term of endearment.” (As the cultural historian John Beckman notes, “It was hip for hippies to *appreciate* ‘spades’” (Beckman 2014).) If one were going to incorporate that attitude into the convention for using the word, accordingly, one might frame it as something like, “Use *spade* to convey a warm and positive evaluation of blacks.” But many blacks regarded the word as condescending and obtuse; as one black critic paraphrased 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” (Forman 1998).

Most of us would agree now with those critics—contemporary dictionaries all label this use of *spade* as offensive or disparaging. But how would we translate what the word's critics were saying into a statement about the content of the convention for using it? They weren't charging that the hipsters had gotten their own convention wrong or were using the word inappropriately—that whatever the speakers who used the word might think, the relevant convention really prescribed using *spade* to unwittingly condescend to blacks. (How could a convention prescribe unwitting behavior?) But they also weren't claiming that the hipsters were conveying honest respect when they used the word, as they believed they were. Yet there's no uncertainty about what was actually going on here; the confusion comes of trying to work the evaluation into an account via linguistic convention. The hipsters used *spade* to articulate a construction of urban blackness that was central to their own self-conception as outsiders. The disagreement is over whether that construction of blackness was accurate or reductive. But nobody was actually in doubt about what the word conveyed.

*Spade* isn't as current as it once was, but this sort of situation isn't that unusual. Most Americans are familiar with the very public campaign to persuade the Washington Redskins football team to change what many regard as an offensive name. The team's owners and many of its supporters maintain that the term is meant as a tribute to the toughness, bravery and perseverance that are part of the “the proud legacy and traditions of Native Americans,” as the team's president puts it. Opponents of the name reply that fight songs that begin with an apostrophe to “braves on the warpath,” accompanied by marching bands in war bonnets and cheerleaders in Indian regalia, are no less dehumanizing and demeaning than the evocations of

more derisive or hostile stereotypes. That's the evaluation of the word provided by standard dictionaries, which label it as derogatory or offensive, as well as by the US federal courts.<sup>29</sup>

But here again, we get ourselves into a muddle if we try to frame the dispute in terms of the content of the linguistic convention for using the word. Are the team's defenders mistaken about the word's meaning when they use the term in what they, along with what polls say is a majority of Americans, take to be a positive and respectful way? (This is not an atypical view, like that of the speaker who uses *spic* or *kraut* without holding any personal animus toward its targets.) Or are they conforming to a convention that prescribes using the word respectfully, and in that case why shouldn't dictionaries and the TTAB acknowledge the fact? Does *redskin* become a slur only when a substantial proportion of those who use it come to realize that it expresses contempt or disrespect for present-day Native Americans? That's one of the arguments the team offers in its defense, claiming that the word was not disparaging when the team was first named in 1933 since no one considered it such. And in fact it would seem as if an affectivist might have to go along with that view, and claim that a word can't be derogative if none of its users find it so; at the most, it could be expressive of an attitude that others consider contemptuous.

Yet, again, the facts are not in dispute. The attitude that the team's defenders regard as respectful is a reading of the attitudes that *redskin* expresses in the word's historical provenance, as largely embodied, in this case, in the mythologized discourse of Western literature and movie and TV Westerns. According to the conservative columnist Pat Buchanan, defending the team's use of the name, that discourse demonstrates that "these were people who stood, fought and died and did not whimper" (Buchanan 2013).<sup>30</sup> Others watch the same movies that Buchanan did and

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<sup>29</sup> In June of 2014, Trademark Trial and Appeals Board of the US Patent and Trademark Office cancelled the team's mark on the grounds that trademark law doesn't permit the registration of marks that "may disparage persons or bring them into contempt or disrepute," noting that the word was offensive to a "substantial composite" of American Indians. In August of 2015, the TTAB's decision was upheld by a US District Court; the matter is under further appeal. I served as the linguistic expert on behalf of the Native Americans who petitioned the USPTO to cancel the mark.

<sup>30</sup> A curious feature of *redskin* is that the stereotypes it brings to mind are associated with the prototypical Plains Indian or Southwest Indian of the late nineteenth century, though the group actually denoted by the term is not historically circumscribed in the way, say, that *Viking* refers just to ninth- through eleventh-century Scandinavians and not to their modern descendants. That is, *redskin* imputes historical stereotypes of bloodthirstiness and savagery to contemporary

conclude that conception of Native Americans that the word expressed in those sources was condescending and racist. But again, this isn't an argument about the meaning of the word; neither side has an interest in claiming that *redskin* is ambiguous.

These cases may seem exceptional, but such discrepancies between intention and reception are quite common. Think of various usages of *lady*, *gal* and *girl* (as in "I'll have my gal set up a meeting") or of démodé terms like *colored*, *half-breed*, *mulatto*, *Oriental* and in certain regions, *Spanish* for Latinos, all of them considered neutral or respectful by the diminishing number of speakers who still use them and disrespectful or clueless by many of the rest of us. Or think of the various terms associated with physical and mental disabilities. Does an older speaker who refers to someone as "a poor cripple" manifest his contempt for her? Not by his own lights, certainly; he means it as an expression of genuine compassion and solicitude. It's others who see the usage as troubling in the light of contemporary attitudes about disability; they hear *cripple* as conveying not just excessive pity, but suppressed revulsion—and as having always conveyed those things, even when all its users thought it was polite. Even when terms are unequivocally negative, as with many prototypical slurs, there are considerable ranges of affective variation that would have to be filled in by pragmatic inferences. But if such inferences are capable of sorting out the nuanced distinctions among *spade*, *coon*, and *nigger*, why would they be unable to tell us that the words are all negative, so that a convention becomes necessary to do the work? If you're steeped in the period and know that *spade* was the word the hipsters used for blacks, what more would you need to figure out what affect it conveyed? What could a convention contribute that you didn't know already?

Like all popular language, slurs arise from the ground up and reflect the textures of the immediate experience of a group—Allen's "historical situations...issues wrangled over, and ... the very incidents of contention." Those are the contexts and encounters that invest each slur with its singular color and attitude and that generate the inevitable misunderstandings that can make the words land differently for the speaker and hearer. There's no grounds for assuming that we could reduce all of these attitudes to a uniform affective element that figures in the meaning of each of these words. Even if we could, it wouldn't advance our understanding of how they work. What we want to understand, rather, is how people use the words to express the particular identities and attitudes that they evoke. That turns out to be part of a larger story that takes the phenomenon in a different direction.

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Indians as well. But its users are not frequently aware of that implication, which is what leads them to deny the word is a slur.

### *A Note on “Perspectives”*

A good deal of what I’ve argued here is consistent with Camp’s suggestion (Camp 2013) that slurs signal “allegiance to a perspective: an integrated, intuitive way of cognizing members of the targeted group.” In her sense of the term, a perspective doesn’t necessarily commit one to certain characterizations of the target; rather it’s a “disposition to structure one’s thoughts” about them in certain ways. It need not entail either acceptance of particular propositions about the referents. Nor does it require a certain affective response to them, such as contempt, though that will often follow from a more amorphous derogating attitude that the perspective implies. This view isn’t susceptible to many of the critiques I’ve offered here of views that identify the import of a slur with either a stereotype or the expression of a certain affect. It seems to accommodate cases where the users of slurs don’t see themselves as expressing contempt for the targeted group, such as in the examples of *redskin* and *spade* that I mentioned, and perhaps the impression that the import of slurs is ineffable and unparaphrasable.

There are several points of departure between this view and mine. First, Camp argues that the association of a slur and a perspective has to be part of the word’s conventional meaning, in virtue of the defeasibility of the words’ import. We’ll see below that this doesn’t follow—implicatures arising from floutings of the maxim of manner are typically nondefeasible—but by itself it doesn’t undermine the thesis that the import of a slur is the perspective it signals. Second, “perspective” seems a rather vague notion when it comes to teasing apart the specific colorings of the slurs for a particular group. Whatever distinguishes *redskin* from *injun* or *nigger* from *coon*, it’s more precise and richer than simply a disposition to think about the referents in certain ways. And if we want to get at the perspective implicit in the use of *redskin*, we’ll need to talk not just about dispositions to think in certain ways about race, but of mode of reading a certain tradition of American historical representations and their significance in national life. What many slurs really bring to mind is neither a stereotype nor an affect but a set of narratives. Not that “perspective” is the wrong notion to use here, but it needs to be situated and filled in to be of real explanatory use.

The third point of difference is related to the second: to speak of signaling an allegiance to a perspective seems to make the latter an full-fledged citizen of cultural life, something that’s independently abroad in society. That may not be a misleading way to think of things like political orientations, which Camp cites as a paradigmatic instance of a perspective: when we signal an allegiance to liberalism, say, we’re not necessarily allying ourselves with some particular group of liberals. But as we’ve seen, most slurs signal the speaker’s self-affiliation with

a particular group or community. To take an obvious case, when you call a woman a *shiksa* you're not just allying yourself with a disposition to think about gentile women in certain ways, but with the people who have that disposition. That group affiliation is primary and prior to the perspective it evokes: you can use *shiksa* appropriately without having any specific views of gentile women at all, but not without identifying with Jews.<sup>31</sup> I'll be arguing below that self-affiliation is central both to the sense of complicity slurs can occasion in their nontargeted listeners and the explosive impact they can have on their targets.

## **Slurs as Conversational Implicatures**

### ***The Counterpart Condition***

Having argued at some length that the import of slurs—what they convey about the speaker and the referent—couldn't be part of their conventional linguistic meanings, I want to offer a positive account of how import arises as a pragmatic inference. In a way, that assumption has always been implicit in most semanticist approaches to slurs. On these views, slurs acquire their derogatory powers from their conventional meanings. Yet when it comes to defining or characterizing slurs, many writers feel the need to add an additional clause that implicitly suggests a role for conversational inferences. Take Richard's (Richard 2008) definition of slurs. He first reprises the semanticist hypothesis:

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.

But Richard adds another stipulation:

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

This "counterpart" condition is cited by a number of philosophers who otherwise offer varying accounts of the semantics of slurs, some making it a part of the definition of a slur and others a characteristic feature; see e.g. (Bach 2014), (Bianchi 2014), (Camp 2013), (Croom 2013), (DiFranco), (Hedger 2012), (Hom 2008), (Hornsby 2001), (Jeshion 2013b), (Whiting 2013) and (Williamson 2009), among others.<sup>32</sup>

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<sup>31</sup> Camp does note at one point that the use of a slur signals an in-group allegiance but doesn't otherwise explore the connection between perspectives and the groups that hold them.

<sup>32</sup> Interestingly, the counterpart condition isn't usually mentioned by those linguists who have dealt with slurs from a semantic point of view, such as Potts (Potts 2007), McCready (McCready 2010) and Gutzmann (Gutzmann 2103). That may be because "having a neutral synonym"

On consideration, the conjunction of the two prongs of the standard characterization of slurs raises some puzzles for semanticist accounts. The idea, to put it more generally, is that the effect of slurs depends upon the existence of a coreferential word that doesn't convey the same evaluation of its referent—a word, not just a coreferential descriptive phrase.<sup>33</sup> (The condition that its counterpart be “neutral” is a separate criterion, which isn't justified either, as we will see.) That is, *boche* can convey what it does about Germans because there is another word, *German*, that doesn't. But then what if *German* should suddenly disappear from the language—such things have been known to occur, often for extraneous phonetic reasons—so that speakers who want to refer to Germans can do only by improvising descriptive phrases like “Schiller's compatriots” or “the inhabitants of the nation that keeps France from bumping into Poland”? Would the meaning of *boche* then change so it ceased to be a slur? It's hard to see how such a thing could happen; it seems to call for a kind of semantic action at a distance.

This poses a difficulty for defenders of semantic accounts of slurs. To introduce the counterpart condition is to implicitly acknowledge that the effect of a slur depends at least in part upon the recognition that the speaker has pointedly chosen to refer to something with one word rather than with another. That suggests that some sort of conversational implicature is at work, particularly since the condition seems to accord with the well-documented generalization that marked or periphrastic expressions induce conversational implicatures only when they contrast with a lexicalized synonym. As McCawley (McCawley 1978) observed, for example, the periphrastic causative “cause X to die” is usually interpreted as implying indirect cause, whereas “cause X to laugh” is not. Yet why should we need to appeal to an implicature, if the slur is already doing the work of disparagement all by itself? And indeed, how could the disparagement not be part of the meaning of the word; how else would we know that *boche* is disparaging rather than a flattering term?

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doesn't seem to be a natural lexical feature; there's no slot in a formal semantic description for a stipulation on the order of “w denotes A and conveys that the speaker feels X about A, on condition that the language contains another word w' that denotes A and does not convey that the speaker has any particular feeling about A.”

<sup>33</sup> I will assume here Arnold Zwicky's (Zwicky 2006) definition of a word as “an ordinary-language fixed expression of some currency,” by which standard the category includes noncompositional collocations such as Jewish American princess and Uncle Tom.

One could argue that there is no genuine inconsistency here, that the fact that speaker has pointedly chosen to use the slur S rather than the alternative term A initiates an implicature that reinforces the derogative force of S or the speaker's commitment to it. As Camp puts it:

...a slur's very optionality is part of what makes it so expressively powerful—slurs are arguably constituted as slurs in part through their contrast with (comparatively) neutral counterparts. That is, a [group]-referring expression S becomes increasingly perspectively marked to the extent that a co-referring expression becomes increasingly salient as an alternative. (Camp 2013)

Croom makes a similar argument in suggesting that a speaker chooses to use a slur rather than a neutral term such as African American “in order to most aptly communicate to others, through their lexical choice, the corresponding attitude that they are intending to express towards their target.” And on Bolinger's Contrastive Choice Account (Bolinger 2015), in choosing to address someone with a word associated with a negative attitude toward its referent rather than one with no such associations, the speaker “signals that he endorses or holds... an attitude of disrespect” toward the addressee and thereby allows the hearer to feel warranted offense.<sup>34</sup>

These discussions assume that a slur is an independently marked alternative to a “neutral” term. This doesn't explain the markedness, but does get at an important point about slurs. The effect of a slur will ordinarily depend on our recognition that the speaker has made point of using that particular word, whether as terms of abuse or to reinforce or emphasize group solidarity. But then most lexical choices are going to be interpreted in terms of Gricean principles. A speaker will have presumably have had some reason for describing a member of the school board as obdurate in her opposition to the building plan rather than as adamant or steadfast. But there are plenty of hybrid words that express strong evaluations of their referents which have no synonyms that don't express the same evaluation. The force of calling somebody an asshole isn't attenuated

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<sup>34</sup> Bolinger offers what she describes as a pragmatic theory of slurs, in which semantics has no role to play: the connotations of their use follow from the awareness that they are dysphemisms associated with the derogation of their targets, which speakers infer on the basis of their correlation with the expression of certain attitudes toward the members of a group. This is consistent with what I'll be arguing here (Bolinger draws on an unpublished version of this paper), but the mechanism it invokes is too general by itself to distinguish slurs from hybrid terms whose evaluation is incorporated in their conventional meaning. It's on the basis of observations about correlations, after all, that language learners conclude that words such as *bitch* and *toady* are used to disparage the people they're applied to, and in fact Bolinger cites examples like these in making her point. There's more to be said about the particular kinds of correlations that figure in the use of slurs and their implications for the identity of the speaker herself, as we will see.

by the absence of a word denoting someone who is not obtusely self-considering. Similarly for hybrid words such *toady*, *slut* or *goon* (“a bully or thug, especially one hired to terrorize or do away with opposition”). There are no nonevaluative synonyms for derogations such as Uncle Tom and Jewish American princess, but their use is offensive all the same. In fact not all of the words we clearly think of as slurs have synonyms with alternate evaluations. Some notable examples are umbrella derogatives for what on the consensus view are collections of distinct groups that ought not to be conflated, such as *slope* for East Asians and *wog* for what Merriam-Webster defines as “a dark-skinned foreigner; especially one from the Middle East or Far East.”<sup>35</sup> (So too were words like *fairy* and *nancy* for homosexuals until recent times, a point I’ll come back to below.)<sup>36</sup>

So the effect of a slur can’t arise simply because the speaker has chosen to use a negative or disparaging term where a neutral one was available. If slurs are marked, it’s because their use is a pointed conversational transgression—a departure from the norms that would ordinarily govern referential practice in that situation. That explains why slurs are different from pejorative hybrid terms such as *goon*, and why the relevant alternative, if there is one, has to be another lexical item, rather than a compact descriptive phrase that denotes the same category but doesn’t express the same evaluation. That follows only when we bear in mind that slurs and their alternatives are socially anchored in communities of speakers who have developed specific conventions for

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<sup>35</sup> *Squaw* is another example of a slur with no default lexicalized default equivalent (one can of course speak of a Native American woman). As Hill (Hill 2009) observes, the paradigm *buck-squaw-papoose* is a way of “animalizing” lesser breeds such as blacks and Indians, on the model of *buck-doe-fawn* and *stallion-mare-colt*. It parallels the paradigm *Jew-Jewess-Jewling* (that last term is attested in nineteenth- and twentieth-century use).

<sup>36</sup> DiFranco (DiFranco 2015) notes that a certain class of idiomatic expressions, such as *slanty-eyed*, *curry muncher* and *Jewish American Princess*, don’t have neutral equivalents, but should be considered slurs all the same. These fall, I think, into several classes. DiFranco identifies *slanty-eyed*, correctly, I think, as an “idiomatically combining expression” (per Nunberg, Sag and Wasow (Nunberg, Sag, and Wasow 1994)), but the absence of a default synonym is likely due to the fact that, like *wog* and *gook*, it denotes what most consider an illegitimate social category—i.e., those who “look Oriental”—and hence lacks a coreferential default equivalent. As I noted, individual-denoting terms such as *Jewish-American princess* and *Uncle Tom*, while also described as slurs, really behave like hybrids rather than prejudicials, so the absence of default synonyms isn’t surprising. DiFranco also lists *redskin* here, but that is simply a slur with the default equivalent (*American*) *Indian*; the fact that it references a putative physical feature of the group doesn’t mean it works as a compositional idiom (cf other terms like *darkie*, *blackie*, *burrhead* for blacks etc.)

referring to particular categories; that is, who “have a name for it.” This point—that slurs are interpreted relative to the conventions of the communities who own them—is going to be crucial to the account I’ll be developing from here on in.

### **Meaning and Metadata**

Let me try to spell this point out in terms of the notion of lexical metadata. Clearly the fact that *redskin* is derogatory is an arbitrary fact about that word that speakers have to know in order to use or understand it. Somebody who is ignorant of that fact is deficient in her knowledge of English, not in her knowledge of racism, American Indians or the rules of conversational interaction. But there are a lot of things we know about words which affect the way we use them but which are all the same not themselves part of its meaning. Consider the metadata labels that dictionaries use to define *redskin*:

**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 as a kind of metadata. Metadata labels like these can indicate a word’s geographical or social provenance (*Southern, nonstandard*), its currency (*rare, archaic*), the genre or discourse type it’s associated with (*formal, colloq., poet.*), the field it’s used in (*bot., ling.*) or its typical effect or reception (*disparaging, humorous*), among other things.

Such metadata features don’t belong to the conventional meaning of a word. 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 uneducated or working-class speakers (it is conventional among certain groups of speakers, many of whom are uneducated or working-class, to use the word, but that’s not the same thing).<sup>37</sup> But these features can give rise to conversational

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<sup>37</sup> People may say things like “*redskin* has a disparaging meaning” in the same way they might say “*asshole* has a vulgar meaning” and “*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-

implicatures. 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 gonna get tenure.” In the dean’s mouth, the use of the demotic *ain’t* rather than *isn’t* implied that his conclusion wasn’t based on expert knowledge or a research survey; it was 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 what makes *ain’t* appropriate to the expression of nitty-gritty verities like “If it ain’t broke don’t fix it.” And while “Alas, the Warriors lost” conveys an arch or ironic tone that isn’t present with “Damn! The Warriors lost,” the difference doesn’t follow from the meanings of the words—it’s implied by the use of 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 their effects as having been folded into the semantics of the expressions. One might conclude, for example, that *alas* has become 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 provide a convenient way of coloring the expression of an attitude with literary distance. That is, *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.<sup>38</sup> If *alas* no longer had an archaic character—if it were merely a formal word of modern English like *regrettably*—it couldn’t evoke the same sensibilities.<sup>39</sup> And if its status as an archaism is sufficient to evoke those sensibilities all by itself, there’s nothing arbitrary about that effect that would require further conventionalization. In short, these effects defy semanticization, a point I’m going to keep coming back to.

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

<sup>38</sup> I say “what we think people used to say” because the label “archaic” describes the contemporary view of a word, unlike “obsolete,” which refers to its actual history. Indeed, words like these can retain their archaic flavor for centuries without becoming obsolete. *Behest* and *anon* have been regarded as archaisms since the eighteenth century; *alas* since Victorian times.

<sup>39</sup> One probably wouldn’t say, for example, “Alas, I was unable to get my child to the hospital in time to save him,” where the ironic distancing would be inappropriate—the context calls for *sadly* or *regrettably*. François Recanati tells me a Frenchman might use *hélas* in a similar context. But *hélas* is not an archaism in French; Google ngrams shows that, unlike *alas*, it is about as frequent now as it was a century ago.

### *Ventriloquistic Implicatures*

The maneuvers involved here belong to a family of conversational implicatures that arise out of Grice's Maxim of Manner. Horn (Horn 1984) and Levinson (Levinson 2000) have reformulated that maxim and its consequences in somewhat different ways, though both in terms of markedness, and have laid out the implicatures that arise from flouting them. Here is Levinson, explicating the effects of his M-Principle:

Where S has said "p" containing marked expression M, and there is an unmarked alternate expression U with the same denotation D which the speaker might have employed in the sentence-frame instead, then where U would have I-implicated the stereotypical or more specific subset d of D, the marked expression M will implicate the complement of the denotation, namely  $\bar{d}$  of D.

Or as Levinson puts it more succinctly, "What's said in an abnormal way, isn't normal." This is a powerful principle. It can be evoked to explain the interpretive differences between pairs like *can/be able to*, *tired/fatigued*, *happy/not unhappy*, *stop the car/cause the car to stop*, *pink/pale red*, and *very rich/very very rich*, among many other types.

Markedness is a capacious notion, but for most writers it comes down to a difference in frequency, prolixity, processing difficulty, or morphological or syntactic complexity, in various combinations, which in turn gives rise to interpretations that are more atypical, more specialized, or less predictable. But the cases we're concerned with here differ from the standard examples both in what makes them marked or abnormal and in the kind of inferences that their markedness gives rise to.

Take the dean's remark that "junior faculty who don't concentrate or research ain't gonna get tenure." *Ain't* is no more prolix, infrequent, or difficult to process than *isn't* is. Nor is the difference the same as one of register, such as between saying "Her house is on the corner" and "Her residence is on the corner," each of which would be considered an appropriate form to use depending on the communicative setting, independent of the speaker's social background. *Ain't* is "marked" here because it isn't the variant prescribed by the conventions of the group whose norms should govern the behavior of these participants in this context. And in interpreting this use of *ain't*, we don't look for a nonstereotypical meaning or range of application, which is what we do when we interpret *pale red* as denoting a color between pink and red or take *Sue made the car move* to mean something other than that she drove it. The dean's sentence has exactly the same truth-conditions whether he uses *isn't going to* or *ain't gonna*. What's different, rather, is that in using the nonstandard form, the speaker evokes or impersonates a member of the community among whom *ain't* is the conventional third-person negative form of *be*, as if he were

just a regular Joe schmoozing with other regular Joes. The implication is that the evaluation of the assertion requires no more intelligence or expertise than such people are stereotypically held to possess. That is, in using the “marked” form the speaker associates himself with the attitudes of a group whose norms wouldn’t ordinarily govern linguistic choices in the speech-situation. One could say that the example suggests a variant interpretation of Levinson’s heuristic “What’s said in an abnormal way, isn’t normal,” in that “normal” literally suggests a connection to social norms. But with that proviso, Levinson and Horn’s general schemas apply in these cases as well.

I’ll describe this conversational maneuver as ventriloquism. In a particular context, a speaker pointedly disregards the lexical convention of the group whose norms prescribe the default way of referring to A and refers to A instead via the distinct convention of another group that is known to have distinct and heterodox attitudes about A, so as to signal his affiliation with the group and its point of view. Ventriloquistic implicatures are often triggered by the use of words from a dialect or language other than the one that would normally be used in the conversation. 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 that was headed *Scandale*. When 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, that French *scandale* and English *scandal* are synonyms: when Frenchmen say *Quel scandale!* they express pretty much the same thought that we would express with “What a scandal!” The added implications of using the French word in an English context arise from a familiar cultural stereotype of the French. The effect is ventriloquistic: when the speaker (or here, the headline writer) uses a French word in place of its English synonym, he’s impersonating a Frenchman, or more accurately, a cliché Frenchman, so as to convey the impression that he regards the affair with an attitude of Gallic worldliness.

### ***Features of Ventriloquistic Implicatures***

These implicatures have several properties that are relevant to the behavior of slurs, some of which they share with other implicatures arising from the Maxim of Manner. First, they’re very difficult to cancel, bearing in mind that the inferences one is trying to revoke usually involve the speaker’s attitudes rather than the truth-conditions of the utterance. Someone who says “Alas, the Warriors lost” could finish the remark, “and I’m deeply despondent about it,” but in that case we’d be more likely to interpret the second clause ironically than to assume that the speaker’s “Alas!” was actually an expression of genuine distress. If he was really upset, why would he have put it that way? Analogously, the dean who predicts that “junior faculty who concentrate

exclusively on teaching ain't gonna get tenure" might go on to cite quantitative studies to reinforce his point, but we'd still read him as having implied that the conclusion is obvious on its face. (Hence the conversational oddness of saying, "Our initial clinical trials seem to show that the drug ain't gonna significantly reduce cardiac arrest in older patients.")

Second, the attitudes evoked by these implicatures tend to be speaker-oriented, even in embedded contexts. When a supervisor says, "The *billet-doux* that Bill sent out complaining about the new work schedule was way out of line," the use of *billet-doux* rather than *message* or *email* conveys a sarcastic attitude about the communication. If I report her utterance as "The boss said she was angry about the *billet-doux* Bill sent out about the new work schedule," I would be taken as conveying my own sarcastic attitude about Bill's message, even if the boss had used *billet-doux* herself, since I was under no obligation to repeat that her term in indirect speech, unless I wanted to make a point about her pretentiousness. Similarly, a middle-class assistant professor who has heard the dean's remark might say to a colleague, "The dean said that if we don't concentrate on research we ain't gonna get tenure." In that case she too implicates both that the truth of the conditional is obvious to anyone. If what matters to her and her colleague is only the importance of doing research, then she'll convert his *ain't* to *isn't*, lest she trigger an inference that isn't conversationally relevant.

The third feature of these implicatures is a special case of a general principle that I mentioned earlier, which affects a number of types of manner implicatures, such as those arising from the periphrastic constructions like "cause to die." With a few exceptions, these implicatures are triggered only when the word used by the speaker replaces one prescribed by the convention that would be the contextual default. In other words, there has to be a normal conventional (i.e., a lexicalized) means of saying what the speaker is saying abnormally. The use of a foreign word can trigger this kind of implicature only when English has "a perfectly good word" for the very same thing, as with the *Times'* *scandale* or the boss's *billet doux*. It isn't sufficient that one should be able to render the sense of the foreign word with a more-or-less synonymous English phrase, as one can for French terms like *cinéma vérité* or *crème brûlée*, since the English calques aren't themselves conventional, so those terms engender no implicatures of this type. It's only when a group has a conventional way of referring to such-and-such a thing (that is, a word for it, in our sense) that we can assume that its members perceive a common interest in being able to individuate and discuss it, so that the use of an alternate term implies a rejection of the group's received attitudes about it. This is the principle that has led English-speakers in the past to plunder the French lexicon for items like *affair(e)* and *dalliance* to suggest a more urbane

tolerance than our Anglo-Saxon attitudes stereotypically countenance. (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 as they actually are but as we fancy them to be.)

If slurs involve a ventriloquistic implicature, as I'm claiming here, then it isn't surprising that they should exhibit the same features that other implicatures of this type do. We've already seen that slurs are possible only when there is a nonslurring lexicalized default, a point I'll come back to below. In addition, slurs are often speaker-oriented or “nonreplaceable” wherever they appear in linguistic structure. This is sometimes framed as a categorical constraint that affects not just slurs but all types of expressives. But this generalization is actually quite leaky, as several writers have noted. (See, among others, (Guerts 2007 ), (Anand 2007) and (Gutzmann 2103) as well as Potts (Potts 2005) for discussion of the more general principle.) It's not hard to find unexceptionable, naturally occurring sentences in which the attitudes implicit in a slur are not attributed to the speaker. I already mentioned the example produced by the playwright Harvey Fierstein, “Everybody loves to hate a homo,” where clearly the import of *homo* was being ascribed to the haters rather than assumed by Fierstein himself. Here are a few others:

γ We lived, in that time, in a world of enemies ... but beyond enemies there were the Micks, and the spics, and the wops, and the fuzzy-wuzzies. A whole world of people not us.

γ 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.

γ At the Saturday movies, “Time Marches On” told us how bad-unfair-stupid the enemy was ... The guys were determined to kill a German or a Jap for freedom, democracy, Betty Grable, and the American Way.

γ [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.

There may still be a tendency to be explained here, depending on how we determine what the expected frequency of examples like these should be.<sup>40</sup> But if slurs often do scope out, there's a

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<sup>40</sup> Actually, the great majority of occurrences of strong slurs in nonfiction books that do not appear in quotations have narrow scope, like the first three of the ones cited here. But then most authors wouldn't use the words in contexts where they might be read as speaker-oriented. Things are no doubt different in other settings.

straightforward pragmatic explanation for it. If you are reporting the speech of someone who has replaced an unmarked term with its marked synonym in order to implicate a particular attitude toward the referent or the proposition expressed—irony, disdain, obviousness, amusement or whatever—you’re under no informational obligation to repeat the speaker’s word unless the implicated attitude is conversationally relevant; otherwise, you are unnecessarily asking the listener to rehearse the inferences that the word triggers. Say your apparently pacific and sweet-tempered neighbor is a World War II veteran who tells you one day to your surprise that he was awarded a medal for killing five Japs on Tarawa. When you report the story to your wife—“You’ll never guess what I heard from that nice Mr. Owens next door”—you’ll most likely say he killed five Japanese. If you made a point of repeating his use of the marked alternative *Jap*, you’d be apt to imply that his contempt for the Japanese he killed was a significant element of the story—say that it was what motivated his action. That kind of inference is sometimes justified; what Fierstein was saying is that everybody loves to hate a homosexual in virtue of the homophobia that expresses itself in words like *homo*. But if there’s no reason to suppose that the speaker’s choice of words was pertinent to the point at issue, as it most likely is in reporting your neighbor’s story, then your pointed decision to use *Japs* will be taken as an indication of your own racial attitude. In other words, slurs tend to be speaker-oriented because they are marked alternatives to a conversational default, so the speaker always has an ulterior reason for using them, over and above the proposition he asserts.<sup>41</sup>

The same principle explains why these implicatures are hard or even impossible to cancel. When you make a point of using a word that’s an alternative to the contextual default, whether it’s *alas*, *ain’t*, or *Jap*, you evoke the attitude or a point of view that is implicit in the word, which once out there can’t be walked back. What you can do, rather, is disclaim your own commitment to the attitude by displacing it, often by embedding the slur in reported speech or thought, as in the examples above. Note that the import of a slur isn’t suspended even when the word used ironically or defiantly by its targets—indeed, it’s because the attitudes it evokes are still present that the irony has its bite, a point I’ll come back to. In short, there’s no need to introduce any formal mechanism or distinction to explain the basic features of slurs or

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<sup>41</sup> Unlike slurs, vulgarities such as *asshole* and *fucking* are virtually always speaker-oriented, which is one of a number of reasons for not conflating them under a single semantic category.

prejudicial. Those follow naturally from conversational principles taken together with the notion of a default convention, which is what I want to turn to now.

### **Lexical Conventions and Their Provenances**

Slurs work as foreign words like *scandale* do: they derive their significance and force from the attitudes we associate with the people who use them. By itself, that's not a novel insight. Hornsby (Hornsby 2001) says, "About derogatory words... one finds oneself saying that negative or hostile attitudes of *their users* have rubbed off onto them"; Blackburn (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" (my italics). But what exactly does it mean to say that a derogative "*belongs to*" certain people? One assumes it means pretty much the same thing as to say that the word *scandale* belongs to the French; that is, that it is the conventional descriptive term for A's among the members of certain group—in this case, one whose members are thought to have distinctive attitudes about A's. And it implies that the word does not belong to those who don't identify with those attitudes: *boche* is not the property of people who don't belong to that particular group, even if they happen to share some of those attitudes. Not everybody who uses a slur can claim ownership of the word, no more than everybody who uses a French word can.

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 intersecting communities, roles, 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 provenance of a convention simply as the social projection of that interest, the group of people who recognize a distinct common stake in having a word for such-and-such a thing.<sup>42</sup> Sometimes that's because the word denotes a category the members of the group have a

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<sup>42</sup> I'm interested here only in lexical conventions. I assume, roughly following Lewis (Lewis 1969) that a convention is an understanding among the members of a group that they will try to coordinate their practices around a certain regularity in a particular situation because they believe it is in their common interest to do so. But the arguments I'm giving here don't rest crucially on accepting that conception of a convention rather than some other, and one could as easily reformulate these arguments in terms of Gilbert's notion of plural subjects (Gilbert 1989), which might actually be more congenial to my purposes.

proprietary interest in individuating—*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 an interest in defining a particular category for themselves, whether or not it's functionally necessary. Adolescents coin their own words for friends or intimates, not because efficient reference demands it, but because it implies a distinct 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 merely conform to the convention deferentially on some occasions. I can speak of emotivism, but only in deference to the way philosophers use the word. I can tell my daughter 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. Though over time, of course, a convention can be extended to a broader community, sometimes in virtue of a more widespread acceptance 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.

I'm using "group" and "community" in a very general way. The social provenance of a convention may be an independently constituted "robust" social type—New Yorkers, philosophers, Jewish Americans, inner-city adolescents, real-estate brokers, sailing enthusiasts. Those are the sorts of linguistic practices we typically describe with terms like "dialect,"

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The crucial point of departure is that in Lewis's idealized conception, the content of a linguistic convention is the practice of using an entire language, so that whether we're talking about baseball or cricket, we're conforming to a single convention that prescribes the use of English. (Lewis (Lewis 1975) touches sketchily on internal linguistic heterogeneity, but not so as to affect the general point.) The implicit assumption is that all or most of the speakers of a language want to be able to talk to each other about everything and anything. Whereas when we talk about individual lexical conventions it's in order to acknowledge that things are messier than that. A language, in reality, is "a sprawling mass of crisscrossing, overlapping conventions," as Millikan (Millikan, 2005) puts it in another context. Americans and Englishmen perceive no overriding common interest being able to talk to each other about knitted garments or vegetables, which why the former speak of sweaters and rutabagas while the latter speak of jumpers and swedes. But English-speakers as a whole do seem to wind up trying to coordinating their use of words like *vanity* or *dissolution*—words for which the usage of the writers of one nation can establish valid precedents for writers from the others. In a sense, those alone are the words that belong to the English language as a whole.

“jargon,” and “slang.” But conventions can also be defined relative to a register, medium, or style. There are conventions that apply only among those engaged in formal address, in meetings, and on the telephone. Or the provenance 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 inferred from the existence of the word itself. That is, you could say that the provenance 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 common word for *A*. That definition isn’t necessarily circular or uninformative. It’s enough to say that the provenance 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. That interest corresponds to a collection of other attitudes that define a political identity and give rise other conventions, such as prescribe referring to the wealthy as job creators or using the adjective *socialistic*. But in cases like that we might better think of the provenance of the convention as the participants in a certain discourse, rather than as a speech-community. If you did the demographics you might discover that those people tend to be Republicans, *Wall Street Journal* subscribers, or Hummer owners. But it’s the discourse that’s matters, because however you describe its participants, they don’t use the terms on all occasions.<sup>43</sup> (Think of the discourse

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<sup>43</sup> One reason for preferring “provenance” to Lewis’s “population” for the social domain of a convention is that a provenance can be a group of people in their capacity as participants in a certain discourse or discourse genre. But neither of those words gets directly at the sense of common social identity that a convention requires. “Speech-community” is used in a lot of different ways and usually implies a well-defined and more-or-less stable geographic or social grouping. But as Dwight Bolinger (Bolinger 1975) defined the term, it comes close to what I mean here by a provenance:

There is no limit to the ways in which human beings league themselves together for self-identification, security, gain, amusement, worship, or any of the other purposes that are held in common; consequently there is no limit to the number and variety of speech communities that are to be found in a society.

In this sense the speech-community needn’t exactly correspond to an objective population like “Berkeley students” or “Brooklynites.” Often it’s better thought of as the set of (perhaps fuzzy) properties that define a social group in the mind of an individual speaker or group of speakers. As Hudson (Hudson 1996) observes of speech-communities, “...their reality is only subjective, not objective—and may be only loosely based on objective reality... No self-respecting dialectologist would recognise a dialect area called ‘Northern’ (or ‘Southern’) [British] English, but some lay people certainly think in such terms...” In this sense the idealized speech-communities with which the conventions for words like slurs are identified are not exceptional.

of modern corporate life, in which employees may be expected to refer to their goals as missions and their team leaders as champions. But not even human resources managers use that language when they're talking about their plans for themselves and their families.)

With this in mind, we can think of the individual speaker's sociolinguistic conception of the lexicon as resembling the dictionary entries I mentioned earlier, with words tagged with a pointer to the provenance whose conventions prescribe their use. True, actual dictionaries tag only those metadata features of words that depart from the norms of formal written English that govern the language of the dictionary itself. They label words as substandard but not standard, as regional but not national, as archaic but not current, and so on. That corresponds to the way we tend to think about these things: we assign a marked status only to words 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.

### ***Default Conventions***

Relative to a particular speech situation, we can talk about the default convention for referring to A as the one that participants would ordinarily expect one another to use. It may be a convention to which one or both of the participants in the exchange are themselves parties, or which belongs to the practices of some other group, say if the participants belong to no group that has a word for A. 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 or heterodox attitude toward A, which is what I've been describing as ventriloquism. We can think of this as a case of an "affiliatory" speech act (I owe the term to Daniel Harris), whereby a speaker pointedly claims an affiliation with a particular group. People have various reasons for doing this. 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. (Emulation is the chief engine of lexical diffusion.) 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 term. And sometimes it's to insult or offend someone by referring to him with a term associated with a group by whom he is thought to be held in contempt. In an appropriate context, an Anglophone anti-Semite can suggest hostility to Jews simply by using the German word for Jew, without actually presenting herself as being a German.

Slurs and prejudicials involve a particular kind of affiliatory speech acts, which arise with words that denote a socially disputed category. By that I mean that people are generally aware that there is a significant difference of opinion or attitude about the category which corresponds to an independent social division between groups that have distinct linguistic conventions for referring to it. By that criterion, not all widespread disagreements will qualify. There are a lot of people who hate dogs, for example (cynophobes? misocynists?) but the attitude doesn't correspond to a basic seam in the social fabric: dog haters don't constitute the kind of self-conscious collectivity whose members are going to come up with their own distinctive name for dogs, which is why there is no derogative for dogs as such, Frege's example of *cur* notwithstanding.

The default term corresponds to what's usually called the "neutral counterpart" of a slur; that is, a word which as Richard puts it, "co-classifies but is free of the slur's evaluative dimension." This notion of neutrality is an artifact of the semanticist approach, which makes the slur's "evaluative dimension" a component of its conventional linguistic meaning in addition to its purely identifying function. From that point of view, a term that merely identifies a group will be "neutral" in the sense that it doesn't *semantically* evaluate its referent. But as I've argued here, the evaluative force of a slur isn't part of its conventional meaning but arises from the attitudes of the group that uses the slur towards the word's target. And when it comes to categories defined along racial, ethnic, political grounds and the like, the vocabulary of every group is colored by further connotations or evaluations. Terms such as *white* and *black* are "neutral" only in the sense that they encode the unreflecting body of opinion—the taken-for-granted—that Bourdieu calls the *doxa*.

That point is crucial to understanding how changing social attitudes can alter the status of words, as new defaults appear and old ones are either abandoned or themselves become prejudicials. Thus *Negro* yielded to *black* and *African American*, and *Oriental* to *Asian*. Note that if those original defaults had been genuinely neutral, there would have been no call for replacing them. It's only when an existing default term is challenged by a new contender that most people come to acknowledge its implicit connotations, whether they're critiquing or defending it ("*Lady* demonstrates respect for the fair sex"). The usurpers are apt to be denounced as euphemistic or deceptive, and perhaps as a perversion of language ("a lifestyle that is anything but gay"). As the new term gains currency its connotations are absorbed into an altered *doxa* and it becomes an alternative default in certain subdiscourses. At the point where the new word becomes widely

accepted, an insistence on sticking with the old one triggers the implicature of pointed nonconformity, and it may even come to be regarded as a slur.

The notion of “neutrality” that’s relevant here is cultural or journalistic, and can’t be reduced to a simplistic semantic opposition. To see how defaults arise and shift in response to changing attitudes, we might consider the twentieth-century history of words for homosexuals. As I noted earlier, ordinary Americans of 1925 who wanted to describe someone as a homosexual had at their disposal only slang words such as *nance*, *fairy*, and, loosely, the informal *sissy*. Terms such as *homosexual*, *invert*, *pederast* and, in relevant senses, *Sapphic* and *lesbian* were largely restricted to clinical or learned use until they gradually became part of general educated use in the 1940s and 1950s.<sup>44</sup> In one sense, then, one could say that *fairy* became a slur only a few decades ago. But the fact that the word was considered slang is an indication that people didn’t consider homosexuality a matter to which one could refer directly in polite discourse, other than by means of euphemisms or circumlocutions. Even when *homosexual* did begin to enter general use, it would initially have been heard as a marked choice for the average speaker, a rejection of the assumptions implicit in slang or euphemistic reference, though often colored by negative stereotypes and assumptions. By the late 1970s *homosexual* was being supplanted as a default term by *gay*, before then a term used among a relatively small in-group. Now the words’ positions are in a way reversed, with *homosexual* as a tendentious alternative to *gay*, particularly as applied to cultural categories like marriage and lifestyle. Yet one wouldn’t want to argue that *gay* is free of connotations, either; the word is saturated with contemporary attitudes about sexual orientation. Rather, *gay* has come to occupy what the political scientist Daniel Hallin (Hallin 1986) calls the “sphere of consensus” 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.”) In American public discourse, that is, you can speak of “gays in the military” without any strong implication that you are personally signing on to its implications, whereas to speak of the “homosexuals in the military” commits you personally to the retrograde connotations that the older term evokes. That is, the default term is not necessarily

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<sup>44</sup> The number of articles in the Proquest historical newspapers corpus containing the word *homosexual* went from 9 in the 1920s to 118 in the 1940s to 3529 in the 1960s to 18,139 in the 1980s (by which time *gay* was making inroads). The slang truncation *homo* didn’t appear till 1929 and was rarely used before the 1940s; *faggot* and *queer* weren’t widely used in this sense outside of the gay community until around the same time.

one without evaluative connotations, but rather the one for whose connotations the speaker can assume the least personal responsibility, beyond tacitly acknowledging them as a basis for conversation.<sup>45</sup>

The difference in detachability here—the fact that the speaker can disavow the associations of a default term but not of its alternative—follows from the logic of the implicature itself. There’s a nice example of the principle in the history of the antiquated *Sassenach*, the Gaelic name for the English. Given the history of Anglo-Caledonian and Anglo-Hibernian relations up to the nineteenth century, 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, which was how pretty much everybody in those communities regarded the English. But in the unlikely event that he wanted to say something flattering about the English, *Sassenach* was the only name he 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. At that point, a speaker could use *Sassenach* to symbolically affiliate himself with the Gaelic-speaking Celts in order to evoke their attitudes about the English, either in earnest or in jest, as Buck Mulligan does in the Telemachus chapter of *Ulysses* when he applies it to the English houseguest Haines. But in that 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 would almost certainly be interpreted ironically, though he could make the same utterance in Irish and perhaps be counted sincere. Yet 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 positive about Englishmen while speaking English, after

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<sup>45</sup> Note though that when views about a category are highly polarized, there is often no single default convention that answers to the interests of everyone in the larger discourse of public life. Journalists can’t describe the parties to the debate over abortion as being either “pro-life” or “pro-choice” without seeming to compromise their claims to objectivity, so they are obliged to resort to paraphrases like “pro-abortion rights,” which almost never appear outside of news stories or formal policy discussions. 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 Solomonicly splitting the difference.)

all, why would he make a point of using a word that signaled his affiliation with a group whose members stereotypically detest them?

At no point, then, do the associations of these words work their way into their semantics. There's nothing in the meaning of the phrase *free enterprise* that's explicitly approving of capitalism. It's not a hybrid term like *nanny state*, which semantically disparages its referent. Rather it's just the default 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 evaluation associated with the phrase isn't accessible to contestation or negation. In response to somebody's claim that the regime encourages free enterprise, you wouldn't ordinarily say, "That's not true; they encourage dog-eat-dog capitalism." And it's why someone can assert that free enterprise is the fairest and most productive economic system without suggesting redundancy: she's simply repeating what counts as the received wisdom about free-market capitalism among people who have their own special name for it. By way of analogy, think of a Catholic priest telling his parishioners that the Holy Mother Church is the one true religion. They don't take him as having asserted a tautology, even though anyone who describes Catholicism in earnest as the Holy Mother Church is very likely to believe in the unique truth of the faith. Nor would even the most dogmatic anti-Catholic say that the sentence "The Holy Mother Church is addressing the problem" has no truth-value, just because the phrase seems to imply the truth of the Catholic religion. It's simply the phrase used by devout Catholics to denote an institution about which others hold different beliefs.

Note that these points seem to obviate the position that Bach (Bach 2014) describes as loaded descriptivism, which takes the conventional meaning of a term like *kike* to be something like "Jewish and contemptible on that account," with the second clause interpreted as a kind of supplement that isn't accessible to negation. Once we recognize slurs as a kind of ventriloquism, that stipulation is no longer necessary. Suppose that S is a member of a culture in which it is considered normal and healthy for adults to take a sexual interest in young children, so that the word that translates as "pedophile" in the language of that culture has no particular negative connotations. S, however, believing that such people are pathological and abhorrent, decides to take advantage of widespread familiarity with English and English-speakers and refer to such adults using the English word *pedophile*, so as to evoke the well-known Anglophone abhorrence for the disposition. One wouldn't say that in saying X is a pedophile, using the English word, S has said that X takes a sexual interest in children and is contemptible on that account. He has

merely expressed himself in the manner of those who are known to hold such a view. Substitute racists for Anglophones and some racial slur for *pedophile*, and the story is the same.

### **From Description to Derogation**

The example of *Sassenach* foregrounds the importance of stereotypes in fixing the implications of a prejudicial term—not of its targets, but of the people who use them. 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 provenance as a descriptive term. The imputed attitudes may be genuinely prevalent in that setting, as they were with the Gaelic uses of *Sassenach*, but they can also be folkloric or fictive, as they are when we use a French word like *scandale*.<sup>46</sup>

Things work in 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

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<sup>46</sup> At one point Williamson (Williamson 2009) entertains an account of slurs very like the one I’m developing here:

...there can be non-semantic sociological differences between terms with the same reference. For instance, the expressions E and E\* both refer to X, but E predominates in the dialect of a social group G whose members tend to view X positively, while E\* predominates in the dialect of a social group G\* whose members tend to view X negatively. But it does not follow that a member of G who uses E thereby conversationally implies (perhaps by manner) something positive about X, or that a member of G\* who uses E\* thereby conversationally implies (perhaps by manner) something negative about X. For E may simply be the default, neutral term for X in G, smoothly available even to the few members of G who view X negatively, while E\* is the default, neutral term for X in G\*, smoothly available even to the few members of G\* who view X positively.

But Williamson (hastily, to my mind) rejects this analysis:

Those who used ‘Boche’ were not presenting themselves as members of a social group in which anti-German feeling was commonly known to predominate; they were insulting Germans much more directly. The failure of cancellability for ‘Boche’ confirms this difference. One does not cancel the implicature by saying ‘Lessing was a Boche, but I’m not one of those German-hating people who use “Boche.”’

Those conclusions don’t follow: someone who makes a point of presenting himself as belonging to a group whose members despise blacks has quite directly signaled an insulting attitude toward them—and as we’ll see, with more intensity than if he were merely reporting his own feelings about the target. As for the failure of cancellability, we’ve seen that implicatures that arise from certain floutings of the Maxim of Manner can’t be walked back.

there's no actual community or region in contemporary America in which *nigger* is the default descriptive word for blacks in all contexts, as it arguably was among laboring class whites in the ante-bellum South, whose use of *nigger* was typically unreflecting and routine rather than tendentious. Even among the most virulent modern racists, saying *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, which is in one form or the other the standard view, is to say that *nigger* is the English-language word that's conventionally used to refer to blacks when one wants to convey a contemptuous attitude towards them—in effect, that the desire to disparage blacks is just a condition on the felicitous utterance of the word. May (May 2005) says that *kike* means “Jewish and used to refer to Jews with hatred or hostility.” Blackburn (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 (Saka 2007) explicates the meaning of *kraut* as “For any member S of the Anglophone community, S thinks “X was a kraut”  $\equiv$  (a) S thinks that X is a German and (b) S disdains Germans as a class.” Whatever their differences, these and similar proposals have in common the idea that slurs are governed by a convention of the (entire) language that restricts their utterance (outwardly or inwardly as the case may be) to those who have a negative attitude towards the group they refer to. In Kaplan's (Kaplan 2005) terms, it suffices that the speaker have a derogatory attitude toward the reference for the utterance to be “expressively correct.”

I'm suggesting something else: the convention governing the use *nigger* belongs to the participants in a discourse in which blacks are viewed with contempt. The obvious difference is one of scope. On the utterance-condition view, it's conventional among English-speakers to use *nigger* 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. One can argue that most people are susceptible to one or another strain of the endemic racism of modern society, but that doesn't entail that they all want to have an explicit vocabulary to express it. A great many of them genuinely abhor the attitudes that slurs are used to express; others are less troubled by those attitudes than by the vulgarity of expressing them in such a coarse manner, or don't want to engage in any practice that might brand them as “racists,” which has become a universal

execration. One way or the other, none would consider themselves parties to any convention for using the word.

That doesn't mean, though, that we can describe the social provenance of the convention for using *nigger* simply as "racists" or "people with a contemptuous attitude toward blacks." As we've seen, the provenance of a convention can correspond to the social extension of a certain set of attitudes only if the group of people who hold those attitudes are self-consciously aware of their common interests and associate the attitudes with a distinctive social identity. It follows that prejudicials of this type are possible only when a socially distinctive subgroup or subdiscourse holds a self-consciously heterodox view of the denotation of a word.<sup>47</sup> The provenance of *nigger*, then, is the discourse a group of people (or in this case, of several groups of people) who see their common attitudes about blacks as in some way shaping or reinforcing a social identity, attitudes that warrant having their own distinct name for blacks, a word that they alone can own. That doesn't mean that such people invariably use that word to refer to blacks, no more than American teenagers invariably use *mad* to mean "very." They use it in settings in which that social identity is foregrounded or when attitudes toward blacks are at-issue, typically in conversation with others who share their views.<sup>48</sup>

To be sure, *nigger* is a special case, an arch-slur with a long history and a socially and geographically extended provenance. Looking at the word over the *longue durée*, one could

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<sup>47</sup> Blakemore (Blakemore 2015) argues that the derogative force of slurs is derived not from their meaning but rather from the metalinguistic knowledge that that the word is used offensively by people who are "generally prone to hold specific beliefs about the members of the group which the slur denotes—beliefs which are the result of negative social stereotyping and prejudice." I think this is close to what I am arguing here. What is missing is the association of a slur with a provenance and social identity with which the speaker affiliates himself, and which is what shapes its specific affective force.

<sup>48</sup> Virtually all Americans are familiar with *nigger*, and in that sense it counts as a word of American English, even if many Americans would never utter it. It recalls Grice's (Grice 1968) example of his prim Aunt Matilda, who is familiar with the expression "he is a runt" to mean "he is an undersized person," but who has no "degree of readiness to utter the expression in any circumstances whatsoever." What one wants to say, Grice suggests, is that his aunt is "equipped to use the expression." But that leaves open the question of whether she is a party to the convention that prescribes it, since she is presumably equipped to understand any number of expressions to which she neither can nor would claim ownership. It's hard to know how Grice understood her distaste for the expression. Was it because she considered the word vulgar slang, which it originally was? In that case she wasn't a party to the convention for using it. Or was it because she considered the observation itself a vulgar one, in which case she may have been?

describe it as a pure expression of racism, which is to say that it implies no relation between its speaker and its referent beyond the historical fact of black-white alterity. In that way it's unlike slurs such as *spade* and *coon*, which by themselves evoke more specific settings and tonalities, and hence more specific self-conceptions. Heard in isolation, an utterance of "He's a spade" tells us more about how the speaker thinks of both blacks and himself than "He's a nigger" does. But it's misleading to ask what an utterance of *nigger* signifies in isolation. Whiteness can be constructed in various specific ways, which generally emerge "in encounters or challenges from black Americans," as Feagin, Vera and Batur (Feagin, Vera, and Batur 2000) observe, the only occasions which are likely move whites to reflect on their identity. In that way, *nigger* can be the vehicle for expressing a variety of social identities—in America, not just of virulent skinhead racists, but also of sectors of the threatened urban working-class, and of the good ol' boys whose pickup trucks sport Confederate flags and bumper stickers that read, "If I knew they were going to cause this much trouble, I would have picked the damn cotton myself."

### ***Absent Slurs***

If one passes over the role of the communities that to which slurs belong, it can seem natural to see their meanings and functions as directly shaped by abstract societal forces—to speak of them as enforcers of a racist system or as the product of the racist institutions that support them. But without discounting the causal role of societal racism, it's important to recognize that the import of these words is always mediated by the interests and self-conception of the specific communities that coin and own them. Without such mediation, even a strong and widespread antipathy towards a group may have no lexical expression. Since 9/11, many Americans have felt intense hostility towards Arabs and Muslims (to xenophobes, the distinction between the groups isn't always clear). But there is no commonly used slur for either group—none, that is, whose usage is remotely as extensive as the emotions they evoke.<sup>49</sup> Americans are content to vent their rage with chants of "death to Muslims" and "Arabs suck." The absence of such a slur suggests that the alterity of Muslim/Arabs isn't constitutive of the sense of social or national identity of Americans or American Christians—that it doesn't define a social category

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<sup>49</sup> It's not that no such slurs have been coined. The online Racial Slur Database lists a few slurs for Muslims along with a number of them for Arabs, such as *raghead* and *hadj*, which were used by soldiers in Iraq. But while most Americans have probably heard one or two of these, none of them has caught on widely in the way *Japs* did in World War II or that *boche* did among the British in the First World War. It's not as if such a slur couldn't easily be diffused, say by the vehicle of right-wing talk radio. It just hasn't happened so far.

that's analogous to whiteness, heteronormativity or Anglo or gentile identity. That might be because Muslims and Arabs have been historically and geographically remote from the everyday experience of most Americans. But whatever the reason, the absence of such a slur would be puzzling if slurs were simply the expression of general societal attitudes about race and religion.

Even more curious is the absence of Standard English slurs for women. There's a long historical register of words that denote women who are afflicted with various of the flaws and vices women are held to be specifically liable to—*bitch*, *slut*, *whore*, *shrew*, *slag*, *cunt*, *ditz*, and so on (for a historical survey, see (Hughes 1998)). But these are all hybrid pejorative words that apply to individual women (as shown by the fact that their evaluative content can be contested, but not reiterated without a sense of redundancy). In Standard American English, there are few if any disparaging words for women that work as prejudicial slurs such as *nigger* and *kike* do; i.e., that derogate women as a class.

Consider the frame “What else could you expect from a \_\_\_\_\_?” as used to account for someone's faults or misbehavior. When a black employee fails to show up on time for an appointment, one racist co-worker might say to another “What else could you expect from a black person?” or “What else could you expect from a nigger?” Both utterances imply that the employee's lateness can be attributed to the fact of his race rather than his individual character, but the second foregrounds the stereotype of irresponsibility and indolence. Analogously, a man might say to a male friend whose wife has been cruel or unfaithful, “What else could you expect from a woman?” so as to attribute her behavior to the simple fact of her sex. But there is no Standard English word that one could substitute here to explicitly evoke the stereotypes of female malice or inconstancy. One could only say “What else could you expect from a bitch?,” (or “cunt” or “slut” etc.) but those lay the blame on the wife's personal failings. Of course the man could inject a tone of disrespect for women in general by using a working-class word for women, such as *broad* or *dame*. But while those words can evoke a stereotypically crude working-class sexism, they can also be admiring (recall Rogers and Hammerstein's “There is Nothing like a Dame!”). That is, they're not essentially misogynistic in the way *nigger* is essentially racist.<sup>50</sup>

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<sup>50</sup> Two people have suggested to me *cunt* could be used in a way parallel to *nigger*. I don't have that intuition (and frankly don't have a lot of faith in theirs, either). I haven't been able to find any unambiguous example of such a usage among several hundred instances of the word on the web or in the BYU corpora—that is, sentences such as “Now they're going to make management pay cunts the same as men” or “I don't know any cunts who want to serve in combat.” If this usage is out there, it's not very common.

Why should that be? It's not as if men in their misogynistic moments wouldn't have a use for a whole battery of terms to fill out the sentence "Frailty thy name is \_\_\_." And linguistically speaking, it would be easy enough to derive such a word, simply by projecting one of those hybrid pejoratives to a prejudicial, in the process that gave rise to slurs such as *cracker* for Southern whites and *sheeny* for Jews. As I noted earlier, that's how things have gone in the strain of hip hop culture in which *bitch*—and *ho*—are used as prejudicials for women in general. But like the homophobia that usually accompanies it, that "cartoonish misogyny" (George 1999) is meant to be rad as a sign of the artists' gangsta authenticity. That is, it's their means of expressing of a particular social identity, not by casting themselves in opposition to women but in opposition to those who are "fake," "soft" or failing to "keep it real" (see (McLeod 1999)). *Chick* played a similar role as a marker of social identity in its progress from the slang of jazzmen to its use by the hipsters, then the hippies, then youth slang in general (Lighter 2014). In the broader culture, by contrast, misogyny may be pervasive but it isn't localized: it doesn't define the kind of self-conscious group or community that could constitute itself as the provenance of a linguistic convention—nor, needless to say, does misandry. That point calls out for elaboration, I realize, But for the immediate purposes it's enough to note that while some people might find such a word useful, in the same way dog-haters might welcome a prejudicial for dogs, circumstances aren't congenial to its emergence.

### ***Community and Complicity***

The self-affiliating function of slurs is also behind the sense of reluctant involvement that the use of a slur can induce in its audience. Camp is one of a number of writers who have observed that the use of slurs can "produce a sense of complicity in their hearers in a way that other taboo expressions do not." Croom says that the "the racial slur *nigger* is explosively derogatory, enough so that just hearing it mentioned can leave one feeling as if they have been made complicit in a morally atrocious act" (Croom 2011). These observations have to be qualified. Obviously, the hearer who feels a sense of complicity in the speaker's attitude is not going to be a person that the word targets, who is more likely to feel a victim of the act than a party to it. Moreover, the sense of complicity will only be evoked when the speaker seems to be assuming that the hearer belongs to the group whose identity the word signals, who shares his attitudes about the target group. That is, the word is presumably not being used to shock or provoke the hearer, as it can be when speakers use slurs in order to affirm the social identity that's encoded in the label "politically incorrect."

The sense of complicity that slurs can evoke among the members of the group is crucial to socializing them into its communal attitudes. It can also serve a ritual function, when it works to connect the participants in a shared naughtiness. Reporting on her ethnographic research among working whites in an American suburb, Eliasoph notes that in group contexts, participants, particularly men, often used racist slurs and jokes in the same way they made bathroom jokes and sex jokes, in order to bond around a common defiance of polite norms (Eliasoph 1999). In that sense, she notes, “the group was often more racist than the sum of its parts.”<sup>51</sup> (Eliasoph also points out how difficult it is for participants in such a context to object to the use of the words—it would have required “getting on a high horse,” she notes, which would in turn have made the objector the butt of another round of jokes.)

But when the speaker wrongly attributes his own social identity to his hearer (who is presumably personally unfamiliar to him), that same behavior can induce a sense of insult, all the more because these words typically have strong working-class associations. Historically, genteel whites have often taken offense at the use of *nigger* in their presence, chiefly for the speaker’s effrontery of assuming that his addressees were of the same social cut as he. A speaker who used the word before respectable whites, an English traveler to America wrote in 1835, spoke “in defiance of decency and in scorn of those rules which every man who respects himself, and is unwilling to be classed with the lowest of the vulgar, observes” (Abdy 1835). Members of non-targeted groups may still react to slurs in this way, when the words are uttered in the apparent belief that the listener shares the identity they signal. I might bristle at being told by a man standing next to me, “There are a lot niggers living in that building.” But my indignation probably arises not because the remark obliges me to think of blacks as the speaker does, but because he seems to assume that I already do.<sup>52</sup>

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<sup>51</sup> It strikes me that these two functions of the use of slurs are connected: they induce a sense of solidarity because their users can envision the reaction they would evoke among the elitist hypocrites who self-righteously condemn any language that might offend some group. The willingness to use a slur thus becomes a demonstration of one’s candor and authenticity. As the Irish critic Fintan O’Toole (O’Toole 2004) observes, “We have now reached the point where every goon with a grievance, every bitter bigot, merely has to place the prefix, ‘I know this is not politically correct, but ...’ in front of the usual string of insults in order to be not just safe from criticism, but actually a card, a lad, even a hero.” The solidarity invoked by the use of slurs isn’t always a collateral effect of the contempt they express for their explicit targets—they can be directed up as well as down.

<sup>52</sup> The class associations of strong slurs are not attenuated when middle-class speakers use the word in something like the way they use *ain’t*, in a gesture of transgressive insolence. That’s

## How Slurs Offend

Cases like these demonstrate the connection between the social identities that slurs signal and the offense they can offer to those who don't share those identities. But of course when people talk about offensiveness of slurs, they're thinking not of their effects on nontargeted listeners, but their use as terms of abuse, as instruments aimed at injuring, intimidating, or provoking their targets. Those uses of the words may not be very common or fundamental to the nature of the category: as I noted, people can have slurs for a group whose members they could never encounter. But even so, these are the uses of the words that evoke the most social concern, the ones that the label *slur* itself brings to mind. So any account of slurs has to enable us to explain why their utterance can have the explosive effect I'm describing as their impact. In this section, I want to show that here too, the sense of injury that the words create follows from their self-affiliating function.

For semanticists, explaining the impact of a slur requires explaining how it arises from what the word itself conveys about its targets or about the speaker's attitude towards them. If you think that a slur semantically imputes a negative stereotype to its target, then the impact is a response to that predication. As Hom (Hom 2008) puts it:

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.

Or if you think of slurs as semantically expressive, you'll locate that the source of their impact in the affect they demonstrate. Jeshion (Jeshion 2013a) explains the offensiveness of the "weapon" uses of slurs via the contempt they convey:

As a matter of their semantics, slurs function to express the speaker's contempt for his target in virtue of the target's group-membership and that his target ought to be treated with contempt in virtue of that group-membership, because what the target *is, as a person*, is something lesser, something unworthy of equal or full respect or consideration.

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arguably what's going on when middle-class college fraternity use the word among themselves, knowing it would not appropriate at the family dinner table. The same principle may also cover some public versions of this maneuver: in 1853 Thomas Carlyle provocatively retitled his pro-slavery 1850 essay "Occasional discourse on the negro question," substituting *nigger* for *negro*, at a time when the former word was generally regarded in Britain as a vulgar Americanism, particularly after the 1852 publication of *Uncle Tom's Cabin*. See (Campbell 2003).

Now I've already argued that a slur doesn't conventionally convey either a stereotype of its targets or the speaker's contempt for them. But by way of setting up an alternative account of the words' impact consistent with the story I've developed here, I want to show why those semanticist accounts couldn't explain the phenomenon even if they were correct in other respects.

There are several difficulties here, some of them more familiar than others. First, it has been noted that the impact of a slurring utterance can be independent of the speaker's attitudes or beliefs about the target. A slurring utterance can be offensive even when the speaker makes it clear he doesn't harbor any animus against its target or hold any negative opinions about them—recall the Germanophile who says “You know, the krauts have gotten a bum rap,” and goes on to proclaim his affection for them and attribute to them virtues that run counter to all the invidious stereotypes about Germans.

To account for this disparity, Hom introduces a principle of “derogative autonomy”: “The derogatory force for any epithet is independent of the attitudes of any of its particular speakers.” For him, this entails that the content of the utterance has to be augmented externally, so as to invest it with the invidious stereotypes that will kindle the feeling of threat or injury. To this end, he appeals to what he calls “combinatorial externalism,” modeled on Putnam's framework:

According to CE, because the predicative material is causally determined externally from the speakers' psychology... The explosive, derogatory force of an epithet is directly proportional to the content of the property it expresses, which is in turn directly proportional to the turpitude and scope of the supporting racist institution that causally supports the epithet.

The idea is that people can use *chink* in the way they use *arthritis* or *annuity*: the word denotes what authorities say it denotes—or here, perhaps, connotes what authorities say it connotes—whatever the speaker and listener may think it means. If “racist institutions” impute highly negative properties to the Chinese, then that's what any utterance of *chink* predicates of them, which in turn is what gives the utterance its “explosive force.” But the analogy to Putnam's externalism doesn't work here. There's a reason why we describe the nonexpert uses of words like *arthritis* and *annuity* as “deferential”: in the normal case, the speaker and hearer are willing to defer the determination of the meanings of their utterances to expert judgment. But would we want to say that the speaker who uses *chink* but who has benign and positive opinions of the Chinese is willing to defer to the judgment of racist institutions to determine the actual meaning of her utterance? Suppose that those institutions hold, unbeknownst to her or her listener, that the Chinese are devious, despicable and unfit for management positions. Then on Hom's view, those are the properties that her utterance ascribes to them: she may have thought she was saying the

Chinese are candid but she really said they're shift. But if neither she nor her listener knows that, how could that stereotype possibly invest the utterance with "explosive force" in the immediate context? And how could you hold the speaker morally responsible for predicating those features of the Chinese, if she's unaware of the stereotype and herself attributes only positive traits to them? If the utterance does offend, and if the speaker can be taxed for making it, it's in virtue of something other than what she actually asserted.

From these observations three points follow. First, the impact of a slurring utterance doesn't depend on what the speaker actually predicates (or conventionally implicates) about its target. Second, the impact has to be a consequence of some act for which the speaker can be held culpable. Third, the impact of a slurring utterance is also dependent on some external considerations; there has to be something out there that makes the speaker's *chink*-utterance a slur.

Expressivists wouldn't seem to have the same difficulties here as the representationalists do. If the use of a slur conventionally signals the speaker's contempt for members of the target group in virtue of their race, ethnicity, etc., then a slurring use of the word conveys that they are unworthy of respect and so on. (It conveys that even if the speaker is misrepresenting his actual attitude for some ulterior motive.) On that analysis, it would seem as if the slurring utterance doesn't require any Putnam-type apparatus to augment its content. But things aren't that simple. As we've seen, the users of a slur don't always see it as the expression of negative feelings, yet it can evoke an angry reaction from its targets even so. The majority of people who use *redskin* think that they're conveying their respect for American Indians, but the Indians themselves hear it as the expression of racial animus. (Similarly *squaw*, *cripple*, *mulatto* and many others.) That's why one can't say that the attitude conveyed by an utterance of a slur is prescribed by the linguistic convention governing its use. And it means that here, too, the impact of the utterance must be determined in part by what the speaker intends and in part by external considerations.

We can demonstrate the need for externalism without having to consider the semantic variation and divisions of linguistic labor that typically figure in these discussions. Even when a speaker obviously despises the targets of a slur and holds invidious beliefs about them, it's not clear why his utterance of the word should invariably be "explosive" or even particularly disturbing. The impact of a slur more often than not exceeds any insult that an individual could inflict simply by manifesting his attitudes about the target, however malignant they are. Why should I care about the attitudes of some pseudonymous bozo who rails about the kikes in a Twitter post—why should it matter to me or to anyone what *he* thinks or feels about Jews? Not

that his remark isn't annoying in and of itself, if only in the way it's annoying when another driver raises a middle finger to indicate that he thinks I didn't make my left turn with sufficient alacrity. But considered just as an individual, the tweeter has no standing that should drive me to rage. And yet neither his insignificance nor my indifference is sufficient to palliate the offensiveness of the usage.

Thus the offensiveness of a slur follows from the utterance of the word itself, independent of anything the speaker is saying with it. One way of explaining this is via the deflationary account proposed by Anderson and Lepore (Anderson and Lepore 2013), who argue that a slur is phonetically toxic in the way an obscenity is, so that merely to pronounce it, whether in indirect or direct discourse, is to violate a taboo. But that story is another example of the presentism that dogs these discussions, where very recent and local features of these words are unwittingly made the basis for general explanations of their use. As a matter of historical fact, only a handful of strong slurs such as *nigger* are genuinely toxic, and even these have been treated as such only since the last part of the twentieth century, as a deliberate response to the perception that they were already highly offensive. (If one were to accept Anderson and Lepore's hypothesis, one would conclude that words such as *redskin* and *faggot* didn't become slurs until objections were raised to them in the 1970s.) Moreover, the mere mention of a slurring word, while often unsettling, is nowhere near as offensive as when it is applied to someone. In fact the interdiction is much stronger in speech than print. You'll virtually never hear someone's use of *nigger* repeated on broadcast news, but the *New York Times* would no qualms about printing the word, and without the need for trigger warnings to protect the sensibilities of readers.<sup>53</sup>

Some have suggested that the mere existence of a slurring word evokes its social backing. As Camp (Camp 2013) puts this view, "The very fact of the slur's existence demonstrates that the speaker's perspective is not hers alone, but sufficiently culturally established for a conventional signal of it to maintain widespread use." Saka (Saka 2007) develops a similar point; to use a pejorative for someone, he says,

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<sup>53</sup> According to Nexis, in 2013 the word *nigger* was spoken only three times on the broadcast and cable TV news networks, in each instance by blacks recalling the insults they endured in their childhoods. People are more tolerant of its use in print. The journalism blogger Jim Romenesko (Romenesko 2013) 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.'"

...one must belong to a linguistic community in which pejoratives exist. Since the conventionalization of contempt relies, like all convention, on societally recognized norms, every pejorative utterance is proof not only of the speaker's contempt, but proof that such contempt prevails in society at large. This is why pejoratives make powerful insults, why repeated exposures to pejoratives can create feelings of alienation, inferiority, and self-hatred...

But as we've seen, the conventions for using words like these aren't defined over society as a whole but only over certain subgroups, some more prominent or extensive than others. There are slurs or derogatives for just about every racial, ethnic and religious group, but that doesn't entail that the attitudes that each of them expresses "prevail in society at large." Online databases list hundreds or thousands of derogative words and phrases, the vast majority of them obscure. The effect of a slur depends on the speaker's prior recognition of its currency, rather than testifying to it. And if disparaging attitudes toward a group actually are pervasive, the hearer presumably doesn't require the evidence of a slur to be reminded of that, nor does society as a whole necessarily need to coin one; as I noted, anti-Muslim feeling has flourished without the help of lexical derogatives.

I've argued here that slurs function by evoking the attitudes about the target that are associated with the group who have constituted the word's historical provenance, which doesn't sound that different from what Camp and Saka say. Similarly, Jeshion points out that slurs can derogate by activating stereotypes and by "raising to salience histories of group oppression." But none of that alone is sufficient to give a slurring utterance its full impact. That follows as well from the speaker's act of self-affiliation with that group. In that sense the force of a slur isn't independent of the speaker's intentions. But what matters is his affiliatory intention, his declaration of solidarity with the speakers who own the word, rather than his own opinions—even, as with the Twitter anti-Semite, when he happens to personally share the views typical of the native provenance of the word. By affiliating himself with the historical owners of the word, the speaker doesn't simply evoke the word's background but materially obtrudes it into the context. Langston Hughes made that point eloquently 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!* (Hughes 1993)

As Hughes tells it, that is, the force of *nigger* goes beyond anything the speaker believes or feels about blacks, or for that matter, beyond anything that others who have used the words have thought or felt about blacks. It also evokes the things such people have *done* to blacks—with the speaker pointedly affiliating himself with the perpetrators. The word can turn a bigot from a hapless, inconsequential “I” into an intimidating, menacing “we.” That’s all there is or could be to the “explosive force” of a slur like *kike* or *nigger*. There is no need to charge the word with an independent expressive component or a similar mechanism. The effect is less like accompanying the word with a threatening gesture or tone of voice that expresses an individual attitude than donning Nazi armband, a Ku Klux Klan hood or some other affiliatory symbol. As Judith Butler puts it, “The speaker who utters the racial slur is... making linguistic community with a history of speakers” (Butler 2013).<sup>54</sup>

That explains how the impact of a slur can be more explosive and threatening than any expression that merely gives voice to the speaker’s point of view, however charged it is or how emphatically it is uttered. “You fucking Jew!” can be terribly offensive, but “You kike!” is more intimidating and more ominous. (So is “you dirty Jew,” a collocation with a “harsh and hateful... cultural pedigree”(Lambert 2009).) It explains, as well, why we don’t discern any derogation when a slur is used by someone who is ignorant of its marked status or who can’t plausibly pretend to affiliate with its provenance. That can happen because the speaker is a child, or perhaps a nonnative speaker misled by a connotational faux ami, like the Italian who assumes that *redskin* is the equivalent of the neutral *pellerossa*, or the Anglophone who translates *Negro* into French as *négre*, not realizing that the latter term is a slur. Or it might be because the term is regional or obscure, such as *coonass* for Cajuns; or because the speaker is unaware that word is no longer an acceptable designation, such as *Oriental* for Asians or *midget* for those who prefer to be called little people. There’s no assumption in such cases that the speaker has pointedly chosen to use this word rather than the default term—as far as he’s concerned, it *is* the default term. Those situations can be awkward, particularly if the slur is one of the handful, such as *nigger*, that have become phonetically toxic. But so long as there’s a plausible explanation for the speaker’s

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<sup>54</sup> Butler treats slurs as performatives, which succeed “not because an intention successfully governs the action of speech, but only because the action echoes prior actions, and accumulates the force of authority through the repetition or citation of a prior and authoritative set of practices.” This is a position widely accepted by Critical Race Theorists, and I think it’s consistent with what I’ve been arguing here, though I’d put the point differently.

ignorance, we're disposed to let him off the moral hook and offer a polite correction: "By the by, Helmut, we don't say 'Orientals' anymore—it's 'Asians' now."<sup>55</sup>

But speakers do bear moral responsibility when they manifest an intention to affiliate with the provenance of a slur in the knowledge that it is not the default term for a group, even when they disclaim any derogatory intent and insist that the word itself is not a derogation at all. A contemporary American who refers to an Indian as a redskin or who defends the use of the term by others, as we saw, may believe in all sincerity the word is being used in a respectful way. But we're apt to hold her morally accountable even so if she is connecting the word to its appropriate provenance—affiliating herself with those who used it in old Western movies and TV shows, for example. In the judgment of critics and of many Native Americans, to hear those usages and the attitudes they signal as respectful is not just ignorant but culpably obtuse. To be familiar with those contexts and not discern the racism the word expresses is to be the victim of "sincere fictions"; that is, "personal ideological constructions that reproduce societal mythologies at the individual level" (Feagin, Vera, and Batur 2000). But those fictions aren't exculpatory. Here again, it's the affiliatory intention that is morally decisive.

Thus the explosive impact of strong slurs such as *kike* and *nigger* follows from the affiliatory gesture that a speaker performs with a slurring speech act, which is why I say that it's the self-affiliating function of slurs that gives them their power to injure and intimidate. With this in mind we can turn to a third challenge for semanticist accounts of these effects, which is to account for the fact that different slurs for the same group can land with very disparate impact. That point was illustrated in a famous sketch in the opening season of Saturday Night Live (Henry and Henry 2014). Chevy Chase is a job interviewer who asks a job applicant played by Richard Pryor to take a word association test. Chase begins with standard pairs—"tree" evokes "dog" and so forth—and then begins to offer a series of increasingly offensive racial terms for blacks. Pryor responds to each with a term for whites of roughly equivalent strength—"Negro" evokes "whitey," "tar baby" evokes "ofay," "colored" evokes "redneck," and so on, until the exchange ends:

Interviewer: Spearchucker  
Mr. Wilson: White trash!  
Interviewer: Jungle Bunny!

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<sup>55</sup> I say that the speaker's ignorance has to be plausible because there are clearly limits. An adult white native speaker of English who uses *nigger* in apparent ignorance of its associations can be taxed for hanging out with the wrong crowd.

Mr. Wilson: Honky!  
Interviewer: Spade!  
Mr. Wilson: Honky honky!  
Interviewer: Nigger!  
Mr. Wilson: *Dead* honky!

Why do the words that each race uses for the other land with such disparate impact? Nobody has had much to say about that question, or as I noted, about the general phenomenon of variant slurs for a single group. But if these variants correspond to distinct provenances, as I've been arguing, then the utterance of one or another of them suggests an affiliation with a distinct social identity, with its own history, attitudes and practices. If a mid-twentieth century utterance of *nigger* evoked the vitriolic contempt of a diehard segregationist like Strom Thurmond or George Wallace, Norman Mailer's use of *spade* evoked a condescending claim to spiritual kinship with urban black culture—both of them racial sensibilities that were characteristic of the age, but in very different settings and different consequences for the people they were directed at. That's why *spade* didn't have the same malefic effects that *nigger* did, at least in its historical context (a black detective in a 1971 Ed McBain novel speaks disparagingly of the "white phonies who consider it hip to call blacks 'spades,'" which is far from the way that character would have described whites who called blacks *niggers* (Dove 1985)).

### ***Appropriation, Reclamation, and Meaning Change***

It's no wonder that an arch-slur such as *nigger* 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 maneuver depends on how we read the speaker's intentions, particularly if he himself is a member of the targeted group speaking to other members. Not always, it's true; the self-directed use of a slur can signal introjected racism, as *nigger* does in the mouth of the servile house slave played by Samuel Jackson in Quentin Tarantino's *Django Unchained*. But when it's contextually implausible that the targeted speaker sincerely endorses the attitudes associated with the native provenance of the word and when her listeners can be expected to perceive the humor or irony of her impersonating those who use it in earnest, the use can create the shared sense of defiance or repudiation that can be the first step toward the reclamation of the word.

It's important to realize, however, that at this stage the word doesn't lose any of its derogatory import—if it did, the effect would be lost. When gays took to using *faggot* in arch self-reference, it was to evoke and ridicule the homophobes who used it in earnest—an instance

of what Croom (Croom 2013) describes, citing Goffman, as “mock impoliteness.”<sup>56</sup> But the appropriated use may also be directed outwards, in a tone of defiance or challenge. Native American high schools that took the name Redskins for their football teams in the 1950s and 60s were playing on the savage connotations of the word, for example as it was used in the ads for Western movies of the period: “Redskin hordes on the vengeance warpath.” Their use of the name accomplished two speech-acts, depending on its presumptive addressee: the one ironic, for the benefit of other members of the group, the other defiant, aimed at the white high schools they played—as if to say, “Okay, we’ll show you some savage redskin hordes...” This dual function is characteristic of many appropriated uses of these words, particularly when they’re used in a public way, such by the Dykes on Bikes motorcycle club, whose members traditionally lead off the San Francisco Pride parade or by the Asian American rock group the Slants.<sup>57</sup>

Since the derogatory import of a slur is unchanged in first-stage (ironic or defiant) appropriation, there’s no need to assume that it has become polysemous, as required by theories that incorporate the expression of contempt into the word’s conventional meaning.<sup>58</sup> In fact the

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<sup>56</sup> For an analogy, think of the way marijuana smokers in the 1960’s took to referring to the drug as dope, not with the idea of purging the word of its old-fashioned *Reefer Madness* associations but to emphasize them, in a comic riff on the clueless denunciations of those who lumped the drug with heroin and other narcotics.

<sup>57</sup> I should make it clear that I’m not endorsing the position that slurs conventionally accomplish two speech acts, one representational or identificational, the other expressive (see (Popa 2016), (Tenchini and Frigerio 2016), (Camp 2014)). On the analysis I’m offering, someone who asserts “There are two redskins in my class” performs only one illocutionary act in virtue of the conventional meaning of her words, and in virtue of its manner achieves the perlocutionary effect of signaling a certain social connection to the addressee. But an act of naming potentiates an indefinite number of perlocutionary effects, depending on the context of interpretation and the presumptive addressees. The same name can be calculated to induce solidarity among one group of addressees and to intimidate another, the two effects corresponding to distinct speech acts.

<sup>58</sup> Those who favor treating reclaimed slurs as polysemous include Jeshion (Jeshion 2013b) and Richard (Richard 2008), who says, “It is not at all clear that ‘queer’ preserved its meaning on appropriation by the gay community.” In a thoughtful discussion of reclamation, Tirrell (Tirrell 1999) also concludes that the meanings of slurring and reclaimed uses of the words “overlap but are not the same.” The problem here, as in many of these discussions, may lie in the failure to distinguish among the successive stages of appropriation and reclamation. On my account, we can assume polysemy only when an originally derogative term can be used by outsiders without

inferences that give rise to the word's derogatory import are unchanged, except that we don't take the speaker's affiliatory claim in earnest. It's only at the second and third stages of appropriation, which the majority of slurs never reach, that the word really ceases to be a slur and becomes instead the content of a new convention, no longer parasitic on its derogatory use. Gays who use *queer* nowadays are no longer satirizing the homophobes who coined the term, and once that positive sense became a default term in certain contexts, even among straights, a description like Queer Studies has no disparaging implications. (See, e.g., (Brotsema 2004), (Zwicky 1997).)

### **Coda: Racism Without "The Racist"**

It's a telling peculiarity of the philosophical and linguistic literature on slurs that when writers speak of the "in-group" uses of the words, they're invariably referring to the reclaimed uses by the members of the groups they target.<sup>59</sup> That obviously reflects their focus on the effects of the words on the people they disparage. But when sociologists or social psychologists speak of the in-group uses of language, they mean its use among the members of the group that owns it. (Think of a phrase like "in-group jargon.") This would be merely a quibble, except that it reflects the pervasive neglect of what I take to be the primary and prior role of these words as the means of expressing the social identity and reinforcing the self-esteem of their users. That point is suppressed when the prototypical speaker is simply "the racist"—not wrong, exactly, but not of much explanatory value, either.

From a sociolinguistic or sociological point of view, that insight is crucial to understanding the role these words play in the formation and reproduction of group attitudes, mirroring a point that has been amply demonstrated in the literature on phonological and syntactic variation (Eckert 2008). With few exceptions, the words are anchored the everyday experience of

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its original negative force. By that standard, appropriated terms such as *redneck* and *slut* remain monosemous, whereas *queer* and *Obamacare* are polysemous, though one should bear in mind that to speak of polysemy on this account is to say only that the word is prescribed by the conventions of two or more distinct speech-communities with different attitudes toward its reference. But reclaimed terms often acquire new extensions: *queer* now denotes a range of nonconforming gender identities. This third-stage polysemy is inherently unstable: once the reclaimed use of a slur has been normalized, its original derogative use is likely to be abandoned, as has happened with formerly derogative terms such as state nicknames (e.g., North Carolina tarheels, Indiana hoosiers) and political designations such as Tory and Whig.

<sup>59</sup> See, e.g., (Jeshion 2013), (Hom 2008), (Saka 2007), (Anderson and Lepore 2013), (Tirrell 1999), (Croom 2013), and (Bianchi 2014) among others. The sociologist Irving Allen (Allen 1983), by contrast, more appropriately refers to the targets of the words as the out-group.

the members of the groups that use them—as Allen puts it, they’re “the echoes and re-echoes of historical situations, of issues wrangled over, and of the very incidents of contention.” What’s more immediately relevant here, I’ve been arguing that it’s largely the self-identifying function of these words that determines what they convey about their speakers and about their targets—even when, as with reclaimed uses, the pretense of affiliation is patently specious. That perspective allows us to explain some of their familiar properties without having to introduce slur-specific mechanisms—why their import seems impervious to negation, why they seem to be speaker-oriented, why they’re usually marked alternatives to a default way of picking out their referents. It also explains the social features of slurs, some of which have played little or no role in this literature: why there should be multiple slurs for a single group; how it can happen that almost all the users of a word can be deluded about its significance: why the utterance of a slur can provoke a stronger reaction in its targets than the attitudes of the speakers would warrant; why slurs evoke a feeling of complicity in certain listeners (and why they often don’t); why there are no slurs for certain groups that are the objects of widespread antipathies to particular groups.

At the most basic level, it leads us to reframe the question of why there are slurs. From the point of view I’m advocating here, slurring is just a special case of the way speakers exploit sociolinguistic variation to create self-presentations and invest their utterances with attitude. Slurring is no different in method, if not in its effects, from using slang to connect with the members of one’s immediate social group or using recondite or foreign words to make an impression. The temptation is always to pack those effects into the meanings of the words themselves—historically, a way of thinking that dictionaries have done a lot to foster. But if slurring were at root a semantic phenomenon it wouldn’t be worth the time we give it.

### **Acknowledgments**

Earlier versions of this essay were circulated under the title “Slurs Aren’t Special.” I’ve presented this material at the CNRS conference on Context and Interpretation at Cérisy-la-Salle, France in June of 2012 and a session on slurs at the American Philosophical Association Pacific Division meetings in March, 2013, as well as at colloquia at the University of Chicago, Cambridge University, the University of California at Berkeley and the Institut Jean Nicod, at all of which I received useful feedback. For discussion and comments, I’m grateful to Paul Duguid, Joseph Hedges, Robert Newsom, Geoff Pullum, Jesse Rappaport and François Recanati, and in particular for the extensive notes and suggestions I received from Adam Simon, Robin Jeshion, Daniel Harris, and two sets of reviewers for the *Philosophical Review*.



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