

Slurring Perspectives¹

§1 Introduction

Slurs are rhetorically powerful because they present truth-conditional contents from a certain perspective, in a way that makes it difficult to deny or dislodge that perspective, even though it's precisely that perspective which a non-bigoted hearer most wants to resist. This rhetorical phenomenon is also what has made slurs the subject of so much recent interest among linguists and philosophers of language: the difficulty of denial is a palpable manifestation of a more general separation between purely truth-conditional and attitudinal contents, of a sort that calls out for theoretical explanation.

To see this, notice that on the most natural reading of the following pair of sentences,

- (1) Isaiah is a kike.
- (2) Isaiah is not a kike.

(2) denies that Isaiah belongs to the group picked out by the slur 'kike' – that is, the group of Jewish people. But the denial in (2) doesn't undermine, and if anything compounds, the slur's offensiveness against Jews: it 'saves' Isaiah alone from a contemptuous attitude that is implicitly acknowledged to be warranted in general. So unless we want to buy in to that perspective ourselves, we can't use (2) to reject (1); (2) makes us complicit in the original speaker's anti-Semitism. Further, if we avoid repeating the offensive term, and instead respond to (1) by saying something like

- (3) That's not true. / That's false.

then normally, we still only manage to deny that Isaiah is Jewish: we have again allowed the categorical offense to remain standing (McCready 2010). Thus, with her utterance the speaker seems to have foisted on us, not just a claim, which we can deny, or even an image or a feeling, which might primarily be *her* problem, but rather an overall perspective or way of thinking. Although we find it repugnant, our usual options for repelling it only compound our involvement, and even risk legitimizing it.

Several theorists have advanced the stronger claim that a slur's offensiveness always 'scopes out' of all complex constructions, including questions, orders, modals, conditionals, and even quotation (Potts 2005, Anderson and Lepore forthcoming). Although I think this 'wide-scope' behavior is both typical and theoretically revealing, I don't think the data are as clear-cut as recent discussants have maintained. However, I want to leave the task of sorting out the problem cases, and of determining the best analysis of

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slurs' compositional potential, for another day. For now, it's enough to note that slurs clearly do have some 'other' aspect, which differentiates them from their neutral counterparts, and which is at least typically separable from the neutral predication of group membership that enters into the compositional process, and hence is negated or denied by utterances like (2) and (3). Theorists have recently claimed, *inter alia*, that this 'other' component should be assigned the status of at-issue content (Hom 2008), presupposition (Schlenker (2007), conventional implicature (Potts 2005, Williamson 2009), and pure 'taboo' (Anderson and Lepore forthcoming). I myself think that utterances containing slurs advance two distinct speech acts. But here, I want to focus exclusively on just what slurs' 'other' component *is*. What has a speaker *done* in virtue of employing a slur, for which she incurs non-defeasible responsibility? Briefly, my answer will be that slurs signal a speaker's allegiance to a distancing perspective on the group identified by their purely truth-conditional, neutral counterpart.

Before we begin, a few warnings. First, in what follows I will mention (though not use) a variety of actual, contemporary slurs. This will offend some readers, and I apologize. But I believe that we can only get a proper sense of what utterances containing slurs actually do by looking at examples where we ourselves experience their palpable, insidious effects. I hope the offense is offset by a commensurate gain in understanding. Second, in theorizing about slurs, we need to examine the full range of ways in which speakers use them: in particular, not only as 'weapons' hurled directly at their targets, as in 'You nigger!' (Richard 2008), but also in relaxed conversation among bigots, and even in praise. We should not let our revulsion at the bigot's way of thinking blind us to what the bigot himself thinks he is doing in using the slur.

§2 Possible Positions

How should we think about what else, besides predicating group membership, speakers do by employing a slur? We can arrange candidate analyses along a continuum. At one extreme falls subjectivist expressivism: the view that slurs serve to express a raw, ineffable feeling, which in itself imposes no representational constraints on the world (Potts 2005, Schlenker 2007, Kaplan 1999). At the other extreme, we have full truth-conditionalism: the view that slurs attribute further, substantive properties to members of the targeted group (e.g. Hom 2008). Each end has its own advantages and drawbacks. Most obviously, expressivism explains the intuitively crucial fact that slurs are affectively loaded. Thus, one might intuitively think that (1) means

(1_{Ex}) Isaiah is Jewish. And by the way: boo to Jews!

Or perhaps one might analogize the 'other' component to an obscene gesture lobbed at Jews (Hornsby 2001). Crucially, the Frege-Geach problem, which bedevils expressivism about moral terms, poses no

difficulty for an expressivist analysis of slurs; indeed, one might say that expressivist analyses of moral terms go wrong precisely by treating them as if they were slurs. Thus, contrast

- (4) If wearing orange is wrong, then getting your little brother to wear orange is also wrong.
- (5) If John is a kike, then there are at least two kikes working in your office.

The expressivist cannot explain the fact that when ‘wrong’ is embedded within a complex construction as in (4), the speaker does not herself express a negative attitude: the attitude is blocked from projecting out of the conditional. By contrast, it is precisely the fact that slurs do project through complex constructions – that, for example, the speaker of (5) does express a negative attitude about Jews – which makes them so theoretically interesting.

That said, however, an expressivist analysis of slurs inherits some important problems from expressivism more generally. First, not all uses of slurs serve to express an occurrent, negatively-charged attitude on the speaker’s part. So, for instance, consider:

- (6) I’m glad we have so many spics at our school: they always bring the best food to those silly fund-raising functions we have to attend.
- (7) I wonder whether chinks like to cuddle their babies as much as we do.

In (6) the speaker is not intuitively using the slur to give vent to a feeling of contempt, but in praise; and in (7), she is wondering whether Chinese people possess a positive property, and seems to take it that possessing that property is compatible with designating them by that term. However, these utterances are still offensive, and derogatory, in virtue of employing slurs. (In a related vein, Hom (2008, 429) points to utterances which use slurs but in which the speaker herself entirely lacks the negative attitude toward the targeted group, such as

- (8) Racists believe that Chinese people are chinks.
- (9) Are you racist if you believe that Chinese people are chinks?)

If the pure expressivist model were right, these sorts of utterances should be palpably incoherent; but they don’t seem to be. A related problem is that if the speaker were merely expressing her own feelings about the targeted group, it would make no sense to even attempt to challenge a bigot’s use of the slur, because her use would be fully appropriate just in case it reflected her actual feelings, however misguided they might be (cf. Williamson 2009, 17). For the same reason, a pure expressivist analysis cannot explain why slurs make recalcitrant hearers feel complicit: if the expressivist were right, the hearer should be able to dismiss the speaker’s feelings as just *her* problem, much as she would a contextually inappropriate tokening of an expressive like ‘fucking’.

Such problems militate against the pure, ‘expulsive’ model of emotional expression found in e.g. Potts (2007, 171), on which “we infer from the speaker’s use of [an expressive] that he is in a heightened emotional state *right this minute*.” At a minimum, they require positing a looser connection between

tokening slurs and having feelings: something more like expressing a general disposition to feel negatively toward the targeted group, or a commitment to thinking that such a feeling is appropriate. However, as the expressivist moves into these more ‘objectivist’ versions of the view, it becomes less clear precisely how the view is still an expressivist one. (This is something that Blackburn and Gibbard have struggled with in expressivism about moral terms, gradually revising their views in an increasingly representationalist direction.)

At the other end of the continuum, a purely truth-conditional account displays a different profile of explanatory advantages and weaknesses. Perhaps the most direct advantage is that it can explain the wide-spread intuition speakers who use slurs are getting something *wrong*. While most of us admit that an utterance of (1) is true just in case Isaiah is Jewish, many people still have the feeling that we’re being coerced into something in admitting this. More specifically, many people have the intuition that in using a slur, the bigot misrepresents the targeted group, and so that there’s an important respect in which utterances of both (1) and (2) are *false* (e.g, Hom 2008, 437; Saka 2007, 124), or at least *not true* (Dummett 1981, 527). As Richard (2008, 3-4) puts it,

Imagine standing next to someone who uses S as a slur... the racist mutters *that building is full of Ss*. Many of us are going to resist allowing that what the racist said was true. After all, if we admit its truth, we must believe that it is true that the building is full of Ss. And if we think that, we think that the building is full of Ss. We think, that is, what and as the racist thinks.

Again, this is quite different from the typical response toward a speaker’s use of a pure expressive term, as in

- (10) I’m going to move out of this fucking city.
- (11) You don’t have to take that shit from him.

In these cases, if we find the expression problematic at all, it is because we find either the speaker’s feelings, or her choice to employ a taboo expression in the current social context, to be inappropriate. But there is little or no intuition of *falsity*. The contrast suggests that *something* representational, and not merely expressive, is connected with slurs.

The primary challenge for a truth-conditional content view is the implausibility of claiming that in using a slur, a speaker commits herself to a specific content. It is revealing that in the quote from Richard above, he appeals to “thinking what and as the racist does,” rather than citing the relevant content directly. When theorists do attempt to paraphrase slurs’ associated derogatory attitudes, they inevitably surround them with ellipses, approximations, and hedges. The felt inadequacy of such paraphrases naturally raises the objection that Davidson (1978, 44) raised against metaphorical meanings: if the expression or its use does indeed have “a special cognitive content, why should it be so difficult or impossible to set it out?” (cf. Hornsby 2001, 137, Anderson and Lepore forthcoming, 17). Indeed, Kaplan (1999) and Potts (2005) deploy the purported “ineffability” of expressions like ‘fuck’ and ‘nigger’

as a positive argument for positing an expressive dimension of meaning, which is logically and compositionally entirely separate from truth-conditions.

In §3, I will argue that an account of slurs in terms of *perspectives* integrates the strengths of the two positions while avoiding their deficits. Before turning to perspectives, however, I want to put a third, moderate option on the table, which we might well call the ‘default’ view. This is the claim that slurs are offensive because they predicate a general affectively-laden property, such as ‘despicable’ or ‘contemptible’, to members of the targeted group (Saka 2007, 121; Blackburn 1999, 148; Williamson 2009). This view might seem to have the best of both worlds: it explains why feeling is intimately involved with slurs although speakers need not be affectively affected at the moment of utterance; and it explains the sense in which slurs have a representational aspect, but also why it is difficult to spell it out in more substantive terms. It also seems to capture nicely what unites slurs: as Eric McCready (2010 8:8) says, “[I]t seems 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.”

§3: Perspectivalism

In metaethics, the debate between expressivists and representationalists has waged on, even as each side has progressively revised its views in ways that more closely approximate those of its adversary. I won’t venture into the semantics of moral terms here. But at least in the context of slurs, I think that part of the problem comes from assuming that there is such a clear distinction to be drawn, and that these are the only two options. Instead, I want to argue that slurs are so rhetorically powerful (and theoretically interesting) because they manifest and signal allegiance to a perspective: an integrated way of thinking about members of the targeted group. A perspective interprets and explains truth-conditional contents in certain ways, but it does not itself involve a commitment to any specific content. Likewise, a perspective motivates certain feelings as appropriate or fitting; but it is not itself a feeling.

In a fairly general sense, I am suggesting that slurs are akin to other expressions part of whose conventionally-determined purpose is to signal where the speaker is ‘coming from’: for instance, slang expressions for parents, food, or genitals, or the distinction between formal and informal forms of address (e.g. ‘tu’/’vous’ in French) (Horn 2007). They are also akin, more specifically, to ethical and aesthetic ‘thick’ terms, such as ‘wanton’, ‘cowardly’, ‘graceful’, or ‘serene’. These terms at least purportedly combine description and evaluation in such an intimate way that one cannot determine the term’s correct truth-conditional application without inhabiting, at least temporarily, the evaluative perspective from which they are made (Sibley 1959, McDowell 1981, Williams 1985). What makes slurs theoretically remarkable, of course, is that unlike thick terms, they display a strong separation between their neutral

extension-identifying component and their evaluatively-loaded ‘other’ aspect. What I want to argue is that the second, ‘other’ aspect itself intertwines representation and evaluation into a perspective.

The notion of a perspective is itself fairly intuitive and frequently invoked, but it is rarely spelled out in anything like an explicit way. On my way of understanding them, perspectives are open-ended modes of interpretation: ways of thinking, feeling, and more generally engaging with the world, and especially with certain parts of it (Camp 2006, 2008, 2009). Above all, perspectives are ongoing dispositions to *structure* one’s thoughts in certain ways. I think this structure involves two main dimensions. First, it involves dispositions to notice and remember certain sorts of features rather than others, so that those sorts of features are more *prominent* or salient in one’s intuitive thinking, and play a greater role in one’s classifications (cf. Tversky 1977). Second, it involves dispositions to treat some classes of features as more *central* than others, in the sense of taking those features to cause, motivate, or otherwise explain many others (cf. Thagard 1989, Sloman et al 1998, Murphy and Medin 1985); a good measure of centrality is how much else about the subject one thinks would change if that feature were removed. Together, these structures of prominence and centrality make certain features seem more *fitting* than others: those features that can easily be assimilated into one’s existing cognitive structure.

The effects of perspective in this open-ended, dispositional sense are starkly illustrated by differences in political orientation. Such differences may, but need not, eventuate in the explicit endorsement of particular propositions, like *Money belongs to those who earn it* or *Everyone needs a safety net*. Rather, a political orientation is both deeper and broader than any propositional attitude. It is constituted by certain ways of gathering, remembering, and explaining a wide range of social and governmental phenomena, on an ongoing basis. With respect to any particular situation, a hard-right conservative and a dyed-in-the-wool liberal may eventually come to agree about the basic facts. But they will interpret those facts quite differently, by locating them within distinct nexuses of further facts, possibilities, and values.

On this understanding, perspectives are indeed aspects of cognition, insofar as they generate cognitive structures. But they are more like tools for thought than thoughts *per se*. In particular, one can retain an overall perspective while taking on or abandoning any particular propositional claim. Further, explicitly entertaining or even endorsing a certain set of propositions – even higher-order propositions about relative prominence and centrality – is neither necessary nor sufficient for actually ‘getting’ a perspective or applying it to a specific subject. Instead, getting a perspective, even temporarily, requires actually structuring one’s thoughts in the relevant structure, so that they actually hang together for one in a coherent whole, with some properties actually sticking out and others receding into the background, and so that one has an intuitive ability to “go on the same way” in assimilating and explaining new information about a range of subjects. Finally, just as with the literal phenomenon of seeing-as, these

intuitive structures are only partly under one's conscious control. On the one hand, one may struggle to apply a perspective without intuitively getting how the constituent elements are supposed to hang together. On the other hand, and more insidiously, a perspective may burst in on one, and persist in one's thinking one's thinking, unbidden. Thus, for instance, I may be unable to avoid thinking of my colleague as a sniveling, scampering rat, and hence interpret his various gestures, his voice, and even his academic and philosophical arguments in this light, even though I am committed to the belief that in fact, he is an intelligent and reflective person who has consistently displayed courage in opposition to bureaucratic encroachment.²

Just as perspectives are cognitive without having contents in the usual sense, so too are they emotive and evaluative, without themselves being feelings. Considerable empirical evidence confirms a close interdependence between perspectives and emotions: Priming for a certain emotion (e.g. sadness versus anger) affects both which features subjects notice in a presented situation and also what causal explanations they assign to those features;³ while conversely, different ways of framing, construing, or appraising the same situation tend to produce different emotional responses.⁴ These empirical findings support the many philosophical and psychological theorists who have held that emotions impose an intuitive, coherent 'gestalt' on a subject or scene.⁵ Indeed, in ordinary life, it seems that disagreements over how it is appropriate to feel about a situation often turn more on differences of perspective than on bare differences of fact; and we often attempt to convince others to share our evaluations by inducing them to share our perspectives.

Given this admittedly fairly rapid-fire characterization of perspectives, what can we say about their connection with slurs? At the most basic level, by employing a slur a speaker signals his commitment to the possibility and utility of taking an overarching perspective on members of the targeted group as a whole. More specifically, the speaker signals his commitment to taking the property *g* that constitutes the slur's predicative, extension-determining contribution to be a highly *prominent* and *central* feature in thinking about individual *G*s. This means that being *g* is the first thing he would naturally notice, and thinks you should notice, about a *G*. He also takes *g* to be highly diagnostic, or useful for classificatory purposes. And at least typically, he thinks this because he takes *g* to explain a wide range

² In this respect and others, perspectives as I understand them are related to what Tamar Gendler (2008) calls 'alief'. However, there are also significant differences; for one thing, perspectives as I understand them include beliefs within their networks, although they also include much more.

³ Keltner et al 1993, Tiedens and Linton 2001, Lerner et al 2002, Small et al 2006, Dasgupta et al 2009.

⁴ Wallbott and Scherer 1986, Ortony et al 1988, Smith 1989, Mauro et al 1992.

⁵ For instance, Noël Carroll (2001, 224) says that "[t]he emotions focus our attention. They make certain features of situations salient, and they cast those features in a special phenomenological light. The emotions 'gestalt', we might say, situations." Cf. also e.g. A. Rorty 1980, de Sousa 1987, Greenspan 1988, Calhoun 1994, Robinson 2005, and Currie 2010, 98.

of further properties of *G*s: in particular which properties about them really matter, and which are appropriate or fitting for them to possess *qua* *G*s. In this sense, the perspective treats each individual member of *G* as only ever being, and being capable of being, ‘just a *G*’: possessing *g* is treated as an inescapable, defining property of who these people are. (We observe a much milder version of this phenomenon in the preference for a substantival construction instead of an adjectival one: e.g. ‘He’s a Jew’ v. ‘He is Jewish’.)

The mere idea that individual members of a group are substantively characterizable in virtue of that group membership is not inherently offensive. After all, philosophers, or Ivy League humanities professors, seminarians, or Pac-10 football players, do share many properties in common with other members of those respective groups, in virtue of their group membership; and we regularly and non-offensively exploit these facts in thought and in conversation, for instance when we say things like ‘She’s *such* a philosopher’; or ‘He’s a seminarian through and through.’ Slurs are distinctively offensive, by contrast, in part because the criterial property *g* is not actually a substantively characterizing property: it is not a property that ought to be highly prominent and central in structuring one’s thinking about individual *G*s, and most emphatically not a property that warrants feeling toward and evaluating individual *G*s in a certain way. The bigot’s error here is deep; but it is in significant part a factual one, rather than one of conceptual or semantic incoherence. If *g* were really explanatorily efficacious in the way the perspective represents it as being, then the associated perspective would be an accurate way to think about *G*s in general; and if *g* really did produce a range of properties that deserved to be condemned, then its corresponding emotions would be warranted.⁶ In fact, however, race, or religion, or sex, or sexual orientation, are not the sorts of properties that can bear this sort of explanatory and evaluative weight.

In addition to the mere fact of signaling perspectives, of course, slurs are offensive because those perspectives are affectively charged, and specifically negative – or at least ‘*distancing*’ or ‘*othering*’, in the sense that the speaker signals that he is not himself ‘of’ or aligned with *G*s as a group. Typically, as nearly every theorist notes, a speaker expresses contempt toward *G*s by using the slur, much as speakers express contempt toward lawyers by referring to them as ‘sharks’, toward police informers by referring to them as ‘snitches’, or toward strike-breaking workers by referring to them as ‘scabs’. Although it is obvious and undeniable that slurs are derogatory or denigrating, I actually think an associated feeling of contempt is less important and explanatory than one might at first assume; instead, I think it largely (though not entirely) falls out of the more basic feature of being part of a distancing perspective. I think this first because, as I noted in §2, the speaker might not actually be evincing contempt, or any other

⁶ As Robert May (2005, 7) puts it: “Suppose the Nazis were right: it is a genetic property of Jews that they are despicable—sort of like Tay-Sachs disease, but more genetically ubiquitous...[then] to think of Jews this way, to represent them as despicable, would not be to misrepresent them, and so the Nazi’s thoughts would be true.”

particular negative feeling, at the time of her utterance; slurs can consistently be used in utterances expressing praise. Indeed, slurring perspectives often present particular features as both positively-valenced *and* as especially appropriate for *G*s; but this attitude is still offensive and denigrating, because it presents these as the *only* positive features it is fitting for *G*s to possess, given their social ‘place’. Second, different slurs are tinged with different feelings – contempt, disgust, fear, dismissiveness – depending on the power dynamics of the community in which they are employed; as a result, it is too strong to identify slurs with any particular feeling, as the ‘default’ view does. Third, at least in my experience, at least some people who freely employ slurs don’t take them to be especially designed to express contempt or hatred; rather, these people think that the slur just is the appropriate term to use to refer to *G*s, and for same reason that other people employ evocative, perspectival expressions like ‘bobo’ or ‘hipsters with fixies’: because it captures carries a lot of information compactly, and captures a complex intuitive intertwined pattern of thought and feeling.

It should not be very controversial that slurs are associated in some way with perspectives. After all, perspectives are a ubiquitous feature of our cognitive lives, driving much of our associative, intuitive thinking, and at times also affecting our reflective judgments, sometimes intentionally and sometimes illicitly. Further, our choice of words often reveals important information about our perspectives; indeed, we frequently choose our words partly precisely in order to reveal such information. But in these other cases we don’t usually decide that perspectives are part of the expression’s semantic meaning. So what’s distinctive about the connection between slurs and perspectives, which does warrant this claim?

The first thing we can say is that the connection with perspectives is distinctively strong, in that slurs are expressions part of whose semantic function is to signal a perspective. More specifically, it seems that slurring expressions take on the status *of* slurs by being employed in contradistinction to a neutral counterpart. To show this, Jesse Rappaport (ms., 17-18) imagines a community in which everyone shares a mutually-known perspective toward another group *G*, so that from the use of the group-identifying term one can infer the speaker’s attitudes toward *G*s, but in which there is no alternative expression for identifying *G*s. In that case, the group-identifying expression would not be a slur, because it would not have the function of signaling a perspective. As Rappaport says, “In this community, there simply is no *purpose* in marking such a perspective because everybody shares the same one – it is uninformative.” By contrast, in a more heterogeneous and linguistically enriched society, the availability of a slur, and the choice to either use or avoid it, becomes a powerful signal indeed – *both* as a marker of in-group allegiance, in distinction to those ‘others’ who either belong to the targeted group or would refuse to employ the slur, and also as a weapon directed toward members of the targeted group.

Slurs’ contrastive perspective-signaling function also explains the dynamic cycle by which initially neutral terms come to be ‘colored’ as politically inappropriate, and eventually as slurring: as a

term becomes more strongly associated with a particular perspective, the choice to employ this expression rather than its more neutral counterpart becomes an increasingly powerful signal of affiliation and expression (Croom 2011). This allows us to accept Anderson and Lepore's claim that slurs are essentially taboo expressions. But it also allows us to explain why this should be so, in marked contrast to Anderson and Lepore, who disavow any such possibility: "Slurs are offensive *not* because of what they mean or convey, but rather because their uses are prohibited, and so, they offend those for whom these prohibitions matter...to infer [that a slur's associations] are responsible for its high offense potential is to put the cart before the horse" (forthcoming 18-20). Their attitude here is dissatisfying, both because it refuses the possibility of explanation where one seems clearly to be available, and also because it makes the creation of a taboo appear more like the signing of a legislative decree than like the messy, gradual process it usually is.

Second, the association with perspectives explains why slurs are so rhetorically insidious, and in particular why they make even recalcitrant hearers feel complicit, so that such hearers have such a difficult time responding to utterances containing them. On the one hand, by using a slur, a speaker signals his allegiance to a certain perspective on *Gs* as a whole; moreover, he signals this in an overt, conventional, and non-defeasible way, and does so in the face of a salient, non-perspectival neutral counterpart expression. As a result, the speaker has not merely presupposed or indicated his perspective on *Gs*, but has willfully, optionally, and non-defeasibly inserted that perspective into the conversation. This is something for which a recalcitrant hearer naturally wants to hold him accountable. Further, because perspectives are ways of interpreting the world, there is an important sense in which a recalcitrant hearer thinks that the speaker has gotten things wrong in his characterization of *Gs*.

On the other hand, because perspectives are tools for thought rather than thoughts *per se*, there is little or no particular content she can attribute to him in virtue of his using the slur. Certainly slurs are derogatory; but as we've seen, it's conceptually and rhetorically coherent for a speaker to disavow any particular negative feelings toward *Gs* and even to cite his belief that *Gs* possess a variety of positively-valenced features, as in the classic frustrating response in

(12) What do you mean? I have nothing but admiration for spics. They sure do take care of each other. Some of my best friends are spics.

As we might put it, the difficulty with paraphrasing an offensive perspective, especially in order to identify contents one might then contradict, lies not primarily in a problem of "ineffability" understood as Potts (2005) and Kaplan (1999) take it – a raw feeling, incapable of articulation – but rather in a problem of excess and amorphousness.⁷

⁷ I argue for a similar claim about the purported unparaphrasability of metaphor in my 2006.

It is useful here to contrast slurs with analogous expressions that are also taboo and pejorative. For instance, compare

(13) They gave the job I applied for to a chink.

(14) They gave the job I applied for to one of those fucking Chinese people.

In both cases, the speaker expresses contempt toward an entire group using charged language. But intuitively, in (14), the hearer has a considerably more clear-cut task in response: in particular, she can say that the speaker shouldn't feel that way toward Chinese people in general, and challenge him to offer reasons for feeling that way. Both (13) and (14) make the speaker's perspective on Chinese people pretty clear. But only in (13) has the speaker activated that perspective by employing an expression which is semantically, conventionally associated with it. Worse, the very fact that the slur exists at all – that there is an expression whose function is to signal affiliation with a denigrating perspective on Chinese people – demonstrates that the speaker's perspective is not his alone, but a culturally established one; and as several theorists have noted (Tirrell 1999, Saka 2007, Hom 2008), the derogatory power of a slur is directly proportional to the social power of institutions and networks to “back them up.” To compound this insult, the hearer's semantic competence with the slur constitutes evidence that she herself is aware that this perspective is out there. Thus, if the hearer allows the slur's use to stand uncontested in the conversation, she implicitly conspires in perpetuating that perspective. At the same time, though, the perspective's amorphousness makes it difficult to repel the offense, short of ending the conversation altogether.

An additional reason why perspectives make slurs so rhetorically insidious, beyond their sheer amorphousness, is that the nature of semantic comprehension means that simply hearing the slur activates the associated perspective in the mind of a linguistically and culturally competent hearer.⁸ This produces a kind of *cognitive complicity* in resistant hearers: simply comprehending the utterance causes the perspective to affect the hearer's own intuitive patterns of thought – about *Gs*, and about anyone associated with *Gs*. Perspectives, after all, are intuitive structures of thought that are only partially under

⁸ For instance, Greenwald et al 1998 found that over 75% of subjects, including many who explicitly and vehemently deny endorsing the stereotype, displayed stereotypical associative thinking on the “Implicit Association Test.” The IAT is a widely-used paradigm for eliciting “over-learned,” automatic associations, in which subjects are asked to classify words or images as belonging to one of two disjunctive categories, which are themselves comprised either of stereotype-conforming pairs (like ‘White/pleasant’ and ‘Black/unpleasant’) or stereotype-challenging pairs (the inverse). The IAT has been employed, not only to identify associations with crude attitudinal valences like ‘pleasant-unpleasant’, but the specific contours of stereotypes’ contents; and here too, most subjects display the relevant profile of associations for familiar groups like Blacks, Whites, men, and women (Banaji and Hardin 1996, Rudman et al 2001).

our conscious control.⁹ Thus, for instance, Kirkland et al (1987) found that subjects who overheard slurs evaluated not just the target, but also someone who was positively associated with the target more negatively – even when they found the slur itself disturbing.¹⁰ Indeed, the fact that merely comprehending a sentence containing a slur still induces the relevant perspective in the hearer, explains why many people find even direct quotation of at least certain slurs to be offensive: the mere mention of it alters the hearer’s mind in a way that she finds highly objectionable.

§4: Stereotypes and Slurs

It is tempting – indeed, I myself was and sometimes remain tempted – to argue for a more specific connection between slurs and perspectives. It is tempting, that is, to claim that slurs are conventionally associated not just with some distancing perspective or other, but with particular *stereotypes*. On my view, stereotypes are a special instance or application of perspectives: they are communally-shared ways of thinking about particular types, which specify certain additional features, in addition to the criterial type-identifying property, as being especially prominent, central and fitting in one’s thinking about that type. Thus, unlike perspectives, which are merely *tools* for thought, stereotypes do have contents, even if often rather indeterminate, vague ones.

Various theorists have gestured toward a conventional connection between slurs and stereotypes (e.g. Williamson 2009).¹¹ In particular, the fact that stereotypes are generic, in the sense that they represent an entire class of individuals in a way that allows for large exceptions, provides a quite direct explanation for why slurs, along with other statements that invoke stereotypes, are so insidiously difficult to refute (cf. Tirrell 1999, 52) – why no finite amount of truth-conditional evidence directly falsifies them.

⁹ In my (ms.), I argue for a parallel phenomenon of cognitive complicity in the case of metaphorical insults.

¹⁰ Similarly, Nelson et al (1996) found that subjects were unable to repress stereotypical judgments in judging probable career goals of both gender-typical and -atypical strangers even after those stereotypes had been discredited. And the phenomenon of “stereotype threat” (e.g. Steele and Aronson 1995) demonstrates that individuals’ performance is differentially affected by being reminded of their membership in a group that stereotypically performs worse (or better) than ‘normals’ on the assigned task.

¹¹ Williamson (2009, 18) says the following about stereotypes and slurs: “In the case of ‘Boche’, one might say, in Putnam’s terminology, that cruelty is part of its associated *stereotype*; a stereotypical Boche is cruel. Putnam allows that stereotypes may be inaccurate; perhaps ferocity is part of the stereotype associated with the natural kind term ‘gorilla’, although really gorillas are gentle. On his view, the stereotype for a word plays no direct role in determining its reference, but to be competent with the word one must have the stereotype (1975: 247-52). Since a competent speaker may know that the stereotype is inaccurate, to have the stereotype is not to believe that it is accurate; what one must be aware of is that it is the stereotype. Someone who understands ‘Boche’ may know that cruelty is an inaccurate part of the associated stereotype. The exact relation between conventional implicatures and stereotypes deserves further investigation, but we have a clear enough view for present purposes. What is most crucial is the separation of those aspects of meaning that contribute to truth-conditions from those that do not.”

Further, there is ample psychological evidence that stereotypes produce precisely the cognitive effects I attributed to perspectives: they drive thinkers' intuitive patterns of attention, association, and heuristic explanation. They constrain which features of individual group members people notice and recall; influencing what sorts of explanations they find natural for individual behaviors and group probabilities; and they alter the valence and significance thinkers assign to specific constituent features.¹² Specifically, strong implicit reliance on stereotypes appears to be correlated with a past history and future willingness to engage in active or passive harm of the targeted group – indeed, stereotypical thinking appears to be more strongly correlated with past and future harm toward the targeted group than implicit negative attitudes themselves are (Rudman and Ashmore 2007).

For me, the most compelling evidence for a close association between slurs and specific stereotypes derives from two ways in which slurs are systematically exploited for 'extended' uses in a way that other expressions are not. First, many (though not all) slurs permit a contrastive, stereotype-restricted use, on which conformity to the stereotype becomes criterial for application of the term, as in:

(15) Barack Obama isn't a nigger: he's an educated, articulate black man.

(16) I hate niggers, but I love black people. (Chris Rock HBO Special)

In this usage, the speaker implicitly acknowledges that the property *g* which is criterial for the slur's conventional application cannot bear the explanatory weight of structuring one's perspective on *Gs* as a whole. But she still holds on to assumption that the perspective is appropriate for a large subset of *Gs*. More specifically, these uses do assume a fairly specific stereotype, which the speaker takes to apply to a sub-set of *Gs*, and which she takes to warrant the attitudes the slur typically applies to *Gs* as a whole.

Second, slurs are frequently appropriated for 'in-group' use, being embraced by and serving as expressions of pride in group membership.¹³ Here too, it appears that in most cases, appropriative uses work by accepting many features associated with a specific stereotype of the group, while 'revaluing the

¹² For instance, Devine (1989) found that nonconscious priming with stereotypically-associated traits for blacks led white subjects to interpret ambiguous actions by racially unspecified actors as more hostile, even though no traits directly related to hostility were primed. Likewise, Duncan (1976) found that whites interpreted the same ambiguous move as a hostile, violent shove when the actor was black, and as just playing around when the actor was white; Sager and Schofield (1980) replicated these findings in children. Stereotypes also distort subjects' perceptions of objective probabilities. For instance, Ryan et al (1996) found that subjects who judged members of a group (e.g. sorority members) to display less variability were more likely to assign stereotypical properties to individual members of that group, and to have high confidence in their assignments. Diekmann et al (2002) found that subjects consistently underestimated male support for female-stereotypic positions on social and political issues. See Judd and Park (1993) for discussion and review of stereotype accuracy.

¹³ Note that some appropriated terms undergo a shift in pronunciation: thus, 'faggot' retains more offensive sting even when 'fag' can be used as a term of affection; 'nigger' has become 'nigga'.

values' attached to those features.¹⁴ Lynne Tirrell (1999, 60) cites an especially clear articulation of this stance by the editors of *Lesbian Tide*, who argue that 'dyke' is a "badge of honor" to be used by "women who refuse to be beaten down":

The very power and destructiveness of the word 'dyke' as men use it comes from its connotations of aggressiveness and independence—qualities men have always found ugly or threatening in women though highly valued in themselves. What men have meant when they call us dykes is true: we ARE uncompromising (where loving women is concerned), we ARE ugly (when beauty is measured in rigid stereotypes or in passivity), we ARE frightening (to those who fear independent women, we ARE unpleasant (when silence and smiles are pleasing).

As Tirrell and others note, there is often significant dissention within a targeted group about whether 'reclamation' is an appropriate project, or whether the slur's standard derogatory attitudes are so intimately bound up with the stereotype that eliminativism is the only viable option. Which of these positions is appropriate in any given case is a complex and sometimes urgent political matter. The important point for our purposes is that in debates about 'reclamation', both sides typically agree that slurs derogate in large part because of their close association with stereotypes.

So I do take it that there is often an important association, not just between slurs and perspectives, but between slurs and stereotypes. I am now convinced, however, that positing a *semantic* connection across the board goes too far.¹⁵ Insofar as stereotypes are not merely tools for thought, but particular contents – albeit highly complex, open-ended, indeterminate ones – positing a semantic association with slurs commits us to the claim that competent speakers are aware of a certain stereotype in virtue of their semantic competence, and that they commit themselves to that stereotype in using the slur. But for many slurs, it seems that there is too much heterogeneity among speakers, even among bigots, in which features they take to be associated with *g* and what the appropriate cognitive structure for organizing those features might be, for this claim to be plausible. More specifically, for many slurs, it appears to be linguistically coherent for a speaker to cancel endorsement of any particular stereotype at all. Robin Jeshion (2011) offers the following example of such cancellation:

(17) I disdain those queers; anyone who would do that is sick. But I do not endorse those as the right ways of thinking about queers. I have no idea who does it, what they are like, and I don't care. I just think those queers should be locked up.

I myself don't find this utterance entirely felicitous – and not merely because it expresses a contemptible, wrong-headed view, but because by using the slur, the speaker signals her allegiance with a community of bigots who do have further ideas about what it means to be 'queer'. However, I agree that (17) is

¹⁴ As Hornsby (2001, 134) puts it, "the new uses in these examples do not simply supplant the old: they trade on the fact of the word's having had its former hateful or contemptuous element. Where words are appropriated for a new use, old non-descriptive meanings are not brushed away: they are subverted."

¹⁵ Deep if begrudging thanks to Robin Jeshion, and also to Jesse Rappaport, for doing such an excellent job of convincing me to abandon my previous view.

coherent, and that it demonstrates that the association with a specific stereotype is, at least in this case, merely pragmatic.

This sort of example is not a problem for the perspectival view, however. On this view, a speaker who uses a slur signals her allegiance to some distancing perspective on *Gs*. Naturally, she must herself employ some particular perspective, but the slur itself may be neutral among the different perspectives that different thinkers employ: that is, among which further features those thinkers take to be prominently associated with *Gs*, to be explained by being *g*, and which particular feelings it is appropriate to have toward possessing *g* and its associated properties. Further, a perspective on which the *only* feature that matters about *Gs* is that they possess the criterial property *g* is still a perspective: it makes *g* maximally prominent and central in thinking about *Gs*, and ‘zeros out’ or assigns minimal weight, to all other features.

Finally, some slurs do appear to have a non-cancelable association with a more or less specific stereotype. Thus, I take it that analogous examples to (17), with ‘dyke’ or ‘nigger’ replacing ‘queer’, are very strange indeed – and strange specifically because the speaker’s avowed ignorance about what further features might be associated with lesbians or blacks which could warrant her negative attitude is incompatible with her use of the slur. This suggests that slurs form a continuum in terms of how strong the association with a particular perspective, and in turn a specific stereotype, is. In general, we should not expect the boundary between mere connotation and conventional commitment to be a sharp one; instead, our intuitions about how conversationally bizarre it would be to ‘cancel’ the association, and whether that strangeness can be traced specifically to the speaker’s use of words, is a matter of degree. At the other end of the continuum, away from ‘pure’ perspectival slurs with no substantive associated stereotype, lie thick pejorative terms, like ‘snitch’ or ‘scab’, where the possession of certain further features becomes criterial for application of the term. At the boundary lie pejorative expressions like ‘bitch’ or ‘cunt’, which have well-established uses both as group-inclusive and as criterion-restricting terms.

§5: Conclusion

In this paper, I have argued for a perspectival analysis of slurs: that is, for the claim that slurs have as part of their semantic function to signal allegiance with a distancing, derogating perspective on individuals who possess the criterial, purely truth-conditional property *g* predicated by the slur’s neutral counterpart. This perspective organizes one’s overall thinking about *Gs* by taking *g* to be highly prominent and central in one’s thinking about *Gs* as a group and about individuals members of *G*, and to warrant certain feelings about *Gs*. I have left the question of the best semantic status to assign slurs’ perspectival component for another day. But I think we have seen enough to draw some substantial

general conclusions. Perhaps the clearest lesson, which is actually demonstrated by the very existence of slurs, is that semantics needs to study more than the compositional determination of asserted truth-conditions. Semanticists' tendency to focus exclusively on the assertion of truth-conditional, propositional content grows out of a more general philosophical focus on the mind as a rational representational machine. Philosophers from Frege to Davidson have sharply distinguished rational processes, which are subject to objective, systematic, normative scrutiny, from merely causal ones, which can at best be predicted and explained, not justified or criticized. However, psychological evidence increasingly demonstrates that many aspects of cognition are intuitive, context-dependent, associative, and largely (though not entirely) automatic; and moreover, that these aspects of cognition exert a significant influence on our explicit, reflective judgments. This does not mean that we are simply at the mercy of our associations, or that there are no rules or norms for how we do or should think – indeed, I believe that there are norms for what perspectives we should adopt. But we neglect these more intuitive, heuristic aspects of cognition at our theoretical (and sometimes, practical) peril. In particular, we get a distorted model of what language is *for* if we ignore the multiple and manifest ways in which speakers intentionally manipulate those aspects of cognition in conversation, by inviting, cajoling, or berating their hearers into adopting their perspectives on a situation, and not merely accepting their proffered information about it. The role of rhetoric is perhaps most obvious, and most comfortably studied, in the context of pragmatics—for instance, in the use of metaphor. But slurs constitute a particularly compelling case for the claim that the expression and manipulation of intuitive perspectives can sometimes take on a conventional linguistic role.

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