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WHAT DID YOU CALL ME? SLURS AS PROHIBITED WORDS SETTING THINGS UP

LUELLE ANDERSON
University of Memphis

ERNIE LEPORE

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It is no secret that slurs offend. Yet public figures regularly manage to embarrass themselves or worse because of their unreflective uses of these explosive words. Not long ago radio personality Dr. Laura Schlesinger got into trouble by repeatedly uttering ‘nigger’, much to the dismay of a shocked African-American caller. Even though it was clear Dr. Schlesinger did not intend to insult anyone, her callous use caused such a stir it ultimately led to her resignation from the show.

The bottom line is slurs are messy, and so, require great care in their analysis; in particular, two important features of slurs must be explained: first, why do slurs vary in offense both across groups (‘chink’ is more offensive than ‘cracker’, ‘gimp’ more than ‘suit’, and ‘bitch’ more than ‘pig’) and even for co-referring slurs (‘nigger’ is worse than either ‘coon’ or ‘darkie’). Second, how can slurs admit of nonoffensive uses within certain specially marked didactic contexts, and perhaps with quotation, but more commonly with so-called appropriated (or reclaimed) uses among in-group members?

Recent literature in the philosophy of language and linguistics divides the explanatory landscape into two broad camps: content-based and non-content-based, with the consensus being that (uses of) slurs *express* negative attitudes toward their targets. Content-based theorists adopt different strategies for implementing this view, but all agree that slurs (or their uses) communicate offensive *content*.

In this essay, we will challenge the consensus and defend a non-content-based view. According to us, slurs are *prohibited* not on account of offensive *content* they manage to get across, but rather because of relevant edicts surrounding their prohibition. We will argue that *Prohibitionism*, a term we coined, accounts for all the relevant data, namely, both variation in degrees of offense among slurs and their nonoffensive uses, better than the content-based competitors. We will proceed as follows: First, we will present our positive view and address specific issues that arise for it. Next, we will defend our view from objections, possible and actual. And finally, we will compare Prohibitionism with certain alternatives and show why we believe it to be superior. Before we dive in, several clarifications are in order.

I. Terms of Enragement

Slurs are distinct from their neutral counterparts, that is, co-referential expressions for the same group without any derogation, but what distinguishes them? In an earlier paper (see Anderson and Lepore, forthcoming), we wrote:

What's clear is that no matter what its history, no matter what it means or communicates, no matter who introduces it, regardless of its past associations, *once relevant individuals declare a word a slur, it becomes one.*

Note that we are not insisting a declaration is necessary for slurring, but only sufficient for a word to become a slur. Also, we are not claiming anyone can create a slur.

A relevant individual must declare a word a slur for it to become one; but who are these individuals, and how do they acquire their authority? Typically, they will be members of the targeted group. But even a recognized spokesperson for a targeted group may lack the authority to establish that a word is a slur, especially should enough fellow members refuse to respect the edict. This is what happened when the Reverend Jesse Jackson tried at the 1988 Democratic National Convention to convert 'black' from a neutral counterpart into a slur. His attempt failed, because not enough targeted members went along with him.¹

Determining the basis for a group's right to decide its own referential status is complex. An ability to do so may seem to fit in with the right to self-determination. It is widely noted that, for instance, groups have a right for their culture to be respected, and perhaps, supported.² Names are often important aspects of a group's culture, and so, it is reasonable to include the manner in which a group is referenced as a part of its right to self-determination generally.

If this is correct, it is a short step from a right to determine whether the use of a name is permissible to one to determine whether its use is impermissible.³ If groups have power over naming legitimacy through a right of self-determination, then to address them by a nonapproved name might easily result in insult. What is not clear is how approved and nonapproved names are determined. Within a particular group there may be differences of opinion as to which names are acceptable and which are not. And since usually no actual congress settles these issues, acceptability, then, must be determined organically. The names that happen to "take" among a significant portion of the relevant linguistic community are the ones deemed acceptable.

A further important distinction between *slur words* and *acts of slurring* should also guide our investigation into how to identify slurs.⁴ Slurring as a speech act

1. In addition to members of the targeted group, caretakers of members who cannot object themselves can declare an expression a slur. This is obviously what happened with the slur 'retarded'.

2. <http://plato.stanford.edu/entries/rights-group/>

3. By 'name' here we mean nothing more than a referential kind term. Whether slurs are natural kind terms, nonnatural kind terms, or something else is an issue left for another day.

4. Hom and May (in this volume) draw a similar distinction between slurs as parts of token speech acts, and pejoratives as linguistic expressions employed in those speech acts.

1 can be performed with expressions that are not themselves slurs. (2) can be used
2 to slur Mexicans even though 'those people' is not itself a slur (imagine heavy
3 emphasis on *those people*),
4

5 (1) A: Carrie's Mexican gardener asked her on a date.

6 (2) B: I hope she said no. She can't possibly find *those people* attractive.
7

8 Tone or emphasis on locution could render clear that the speaker intends her
9 use of the phrase as an insult.⁵ The speaker intended to "disparage, depreciate,
10 calumniate, asperse," as the *Oxford English Dictionary* describes it. However, B's
11 slurring use of 'those people' does not establish that the expression is a slur
12 anymore than *verbing* a noun makes it a verb.⁶

13 What, then, exactly is a slur? A Gay-Straight Alliance (GSA) network anti-
14 slur campaign defines it as "any offensive, insulting remark or comment that is
15 meant to ridicule someone based on their race, ethnicity, sexual orientation,
16 gender, religion, class, etc."⁷ This definition is a commonsense description that
17 captures popular attitudes but is inadequate since it fails to distinguish *slurs*
18 from *slurring*. Besides, not all slurs are offensive. It is doubtful whether 'cracker'
19 and 'suit' still generally evoke much offense.

20 Another worry about the GSA definition is breadth. In filling out the lin-
21 guistic category for slurs, we do not want to include every single insulting
22 remark or comment. That would be too expansive, and ultimately, unhelpful
23 since many offensive remarks are contextually determined. It is, after all,
24 possible to use virtually any locution to derogate; what makes many comments
25 derogatory has more to do with conditions under which they are uttered rather
26 than anything about the locutions themselves. A more nuanced proposal, and
27 indeed, the received view, is that slurs are better categorized on the basis of
28 their literal content. A word is a slur only if "predicating it of a subject is a
29 conventional means of denigrating its subject."⁸ This definition presumes there
30 is a particular negative content communicated through the use of a slur as a
31 matter of meaning alone. But, of course, is not necessarily so.

32 Look up any slur in the dictionary, and you will find pretty much the same
33 entry, that is, 'is a derogatory term for group y'. This sort of listing seems to
34 reveal more about function rather than about what is communicated. Of
35 course, there are those who would suggest a slur's function *is* a part of its
36 meaning; that is, that slurs are *performatives* whose utterances constitute a per-
37 nicious action.

38 Austin (1965) describes performatives as utterances that *do* something
39 rather than describe, state, or report something. Under this construal, slurs are
40

41 5. Note that carrying out this act could be achieved with a wide range of expressions. Indeed, B
42 could have used the neutral counterpart 'Mexican' to achieve the same result. These uses
43 appear to be specially marked, perhaps through stress.

44 6. It is doubtful complex demonstratives like 'those people' could become slurs, but we could
45 imagine certain innocent noun phrases evolving into slurs over time through repeated slurring
46 uses.

47 7. <http://www.gsanetwork.org/files/getinvolved/TakeItBack-CampaignGuide.pdf>

48 8. Thanks to Wayne Davis for this suggestion.

1 performatives that derogate their target. And performativity, it is suggested, is
2 a semantic feature indicating a derogation can be performed in uttering it. But,
3 unfortunately, the view that performativity is part of linguistic meaning faces a
4 couple of objections.⁹

5 First, it entails that performative verbs are systematically ambiguous. “For a
6 performative sentence can be used literally but nonperformatively, e.g. to
7 report some habitual act.”¹⁰ For example, one might describe typical situations
8 in which one gives a command by saying “I order so-and-so to be done,”
9 without actually giving an order. Such a literal but nonperformative use would,
10 on this view, count as a distinct sense, which is highly implausible. And second,
11 even if a performative verb was never used performatively, wouldn’t it retain
12 its meaning? Perhaps, performative acts would be conducted without the use
13 of performative forms. This would show performativity is not a matter of
14 meaning.

15 These objections, originally applied by Bach to performatives generally,
16 straightforwardly extend to slurs. Consider a situation in which someone drives
17 by a group standing on a corner and yells out:

18
19 (3) You niggers and spics don’t belong here!

20
21 Imagine that everyone in this group is African-American, and that one of them
22 attempts to clear up the confusion with (4),

23
24 (4) I think you three must be the niggers, and the rest of us are the spics. 4

25
26 In (4), we have a nonperformative use of the slurs, and so, if performativity
27 were a part of lexical meaning, and slurs were ambiguous between these two
28 senses, then the occurrence of ‘niggers’ and ‘spics’ in (3) would carry a different
29 sense than those in (4), which is absurd.

30 Ultimately, slurs *as a linguistic category* may be best defined in terms of content,
31 but we should not confuse their definition as a class with what renders them
32 offensive. To clarify this distinction, we turn directly to Prohibitionism.

33 34 **II. Prohibitionism**

35
36 Prohibitionism is simple and straightforward: slurs are prohibited words, and
37 so, a violation of their prohibition might provoke offense. Further, their pro-
38 hibition is ubiquitous; for example, embedding a slur inside a sentence does not
39 immunize its users from transgression, even though sentential embedding can
40 render semantic (as well as pragmatic) properties inert. This is because the
41 prohibition, once put in place, is on every *occurrence* of the slur; and occurrences
42 cannot be eradicated. This explains why the vilest slurs refuse to submit to a
43 unilateral detachment of “the affect, hatred and negative connotations tied to
44

45 9. Kent Bach, <http://online.sfsu.edu/~kbach/perform.html>
46 10. Bach, *ibid*.

1 most slurs,” and it also explains why we cannot “use them interchangeably with
2 their neutral counterparts” (Richard 2008, 62). Any attempt at conversion or a
3 swap for a neutral counterpart ignores the prohibition. Therefore, only efforts
4 that find a way to relax the prohibition can hope to neutralize a slur.

5 Even placing a slur within quotation marks, or in a semantic attribution,
6 need not shield us from its offense, as in (5) and (6),

7
8 (5) ‘Kike’ means kike. [5]

9 (6) ‘Kike’ is a derogatory word.

10
11 Speakers are often reluctant to evaluate sentences like (5) or (6) because doing
12 so risks complicity. We have a responsibility to see to it that certain violations
13 of the prohibition are prevented or, in the event that a violation does occur, to
14 report it, or at least voice opposition to it.

15 Danger surprisingly lurks in *indirectly* reporting another’s use of a slur.
16 Usually, a speaker can indirectly report on another’s utterance without incur-
17 ring responsibility for its effects. Al’s indirect report (7b) of Mika’s utterance of
18 (7a) unproblematically attributes the content of its complement clause to Mika,
19 not to Al, no matter how offensive Mika’s original utterance was.

20
21 (7a) Joe is rude.

22 (7b) Mika said that Joe is rude.

23
24 But should the complement clause of an indirect report contain a slur, as in (8),
25 then whatever offensive content that slur carries will be attributable to the
26 *reporter*.

27
28 (8) Mika said that Joe is a wop.

29
30 This is a mysterious result for a content-based approach to slurs to explain, but
31 for Prohibitionism the reason for the result is obvious. Whoever indirectly
32 reports Mika with (8) is charged with an offense *because* in making this report the
33 reporter violates the prohibition on the slur it contains.

34 With these clarifications in place, we turn to a number of challenges that
35 have been raised against Prohibitionism.

36 37 **III. Objections to Prohibitionism**

38
39 One frequent objection concerns the order of explanation: critics charge that
40 Prohibitionism gets it backwards; it is the *offense* that explains the *prohibition*, not
41 the other way ‘round. The problem with this criticism is that it overlooks other
42 paradigm cases of offense resulting from violating a prohibition. In Jewish
43 history, pronouncing the tetragrammaton (i.e., YHWH) was (and still is) pro-
44 hibited.¹¹ Uses of the name are offensive (perhaps, even blasphemous) because

45 11. Jacobs (1999).

1 they violate this prohibition. But the name is not prohibited *because* its content
2 is offensive. Is there any reason to believe that this sort of explanation is limited
3 to divine names? Obviously, prohibitions are not set in place without reason,
4 but that reason need not be that slurs express offensive content. (They are
5 names after all!)

6 One plausible story might be that groups prohibit names not explicitly
7 adopted by them, for calling a group by a name that its members have not
8 chosen may be viewed as an attempt to usurp their authority to choose.¹²
9 Another reason for prohibition, one expressed in a letter written to W.E.B.
10 DuBois, is that it matters who introduced the term.¹³ In situations where one
11 group is in a subordinate position to another, uses of an expression by
12 the dominant group to refer to the subordinate one can provoke offense. The
13 dominant group's use of the expression might be a vivid reminder of
14 the relation of oppression in which the subordinate group is situated.

15 Another objection to Prohibitionism is that it does not distinguish between
16 the offensive characters of slurs and profanities or other "bad" words. Prohi-
17 bition is what most likely explains the offense attached to profanities. But since
18 a slur's offense is generally perceived to differ from that of a profanity, prohi-
19 bition cannot be the whole story about slurs.

20 What exactly is this difference supposed to come to? Is it a difference in
21 reaction among hearers? It is not clear there is one. Is the point that any witness
22 to the use of a slur would object more than one to the use of a profanity? But
23 this difference cannot be guaranteed. Someone with Victorian sensibilities
24 would be just as put off by a profanity as by a slur. Perhaps, the relevant
25 difference is in the effects on targeted members; we are more offended at being
26 the target of a slur than being the target of a profanity (see Jeshion this volume).
27 This may be so, but even if it is, Prohibitionism surely has resources to explain
28 why. We generally place slurs higher on the prohibition scale than other
29 profanities, thus showing we will be more offended by violations of the former
30 than of the latter.

31 Another objection to Prohibitionism questions whether it can accommodate
32 the offense created by the mere existence of certain thoughts. The objection is
33 that we are offended not only by spoken and written slurs but also by others
34 harboring certain thoughts even if they keep them to themselves. The objection
35 continues, since it is unlikely thoughts are prohibited, how can Prohibitionism
36 explain this sort of offense?

37 It is not obvious Prohibitionism is obliged to account for whatever offense is
38 created by the existence of certain thoughts. Is the charge that these thoughts
39 are offensive because they include slurs in the thinker's mental language? This
40 assumption is obviously not innocent. Are speakers of a language that lacks
41 slurs for certain targeted groups incapable of having such thoughts? Suppose
42 their language includes various slurs for the same group. Which thoughts
43 correspond to which public uses? Or is the charge that such thoughts are
44 offensive because they contain a particular content?

46 12. Thanks to Vincent Colapietro for this point.

47 13. Du Bois (1928).

1 To the extent that we can even make sense of the first suggestion, Prohibitionism provides a straightforward explanation of the offense. Since the
2 thought is alleged to contain (whatever that might mean) a prohibited term, this alone explains its offense. The criticism (if coherent) simply moves the
3 discussion from the level of public discourse to the level of inner discourse. The second suggestion, namely, appealing to negative content, returns us to the
4 objections we raised against content-based approaches for slurring terms in general. If those objections are sound, it is difficult to see how moving the
5 discussion to the level of thought will make things any better.
6

7 Other objections against Prohibitionism arise in the form of different views about the nature of slurs. We will address some of these views, such as
8 Expressivism, Inferentialism, and Externalism, in the following three sections.¹⁴
9
10
11
12
13

14 15 **IV. Expressivism** 16

17 One reaction to Prohibitionism is that it ignores the negative attitudes slurs are purported to express. Slurs are “a conventional means to express strong negative
18 attitudes towards members of a group,” according to Richard (2008). Just what would Prohibitionism be missing, according to Richard? He provides a
19 clear example of someone who holds that the proper place to locate a slur’s offense is in the attitudes it expresses:
20
21
22

23
24 To think or talk slurringly of a person is, among other things, to have certain attitudes towards him, including evaluating him negatively and having contempt
25 for him because one takes him to be of a certain race, ethnicity, religion, etc. The difference between thinking that Prince Charles is English
26 and thinking that he is a Limey is, in part, that one is contemptuous of him when one thinks him a Limey, and thus *thinks* of him negatively when one
27 thinks him a Limey. The attitude—the contempt—is *part of what one thinks*.
28 (14)
29
30
31
32

33 According to Richard, the attitude of contempt works its way into the *meaning* of slurs, into *what is said*. Commenting on why the use of a slur is rejected,
34 Richard writes, “it is our rejection of the thought that *He is an S* [S being a slur]—what the sentence *says*, in as strict a sense of ‘says’ as you like—that is
35 responsible for our reaction” (40). And, according to Richard, part of the thought of a slur contains an attitude of contempt.
36
37
38

39 In (Anderson and Lepore, forthcoming), we deny that slurs differ in literal content from their neutral counterparts. We write that a slur’s “linguistic role
40 is exhausted in picking out the same group as a neutral counterpart” (17). Thus, our position is at odds with what Richard claims. An obvious question for him
41
42
43

44 14. For criticisms of other content-based accounts, for example, Presupposition, Tone, and Conventional Implicature theories, see Anderson and Lepore (forthcoming).
45

1 is what does it mean for a contemptuous attitude to be part of *what is said* by an
2 utterance of a sentence with a slurring sentence?¹⁵

3 It is clear Richard does not understand the attitude to be a part of truth-
4 conditional content. Rather, he argues its inclusion in a slur's content renders
5 any statement in which the slur occurs as *nontruth apt*. He resists calling such
6 statements true because that would be to endorse the thoughts they express
7 (24); and, of course, nonbigots will want to resist this. But, saying such state-
8 ments are false is to charge the bigot with merely making a corrigible mistake;
9 this too is unacceptable since the kind of representation involved with slurs is
10 one where "truth and falsity are simply the wrong terms in which to evaluate
11 the representation" (25).¹⁶

12 To be left with an attitude that each slur linguistically expresses as part of
13 some broader conception of meaning, while still being a part of what is said, is
14 all very well and fine to claim, but what does it mean? There are precedents,
15 for example, in Karttunen and Peters' (1978) claim that conventional
16 implicatures are a non-truth-functional aspect of linguistic meaning, but it is
17 questionable whether invoking this category will help Richard's case.

18 Grice introduced the notion of a conventional implicature, by which he
19 meant an inference that is fixed by the meaning of an expression, but which
20 does not contribute to the truth conditions of the sentence in which it occurs,
21 that is, it does not contribute to what speakers say with utterances of that
22 sentence. Grice observed that (9a) implicates (9b):

23
24 (9a) John is British but brave.

25 (9b) John's being British contrasts with his being brave.

26
27 But notice that, although (9a) implies his being British contrasts with his being
28 brave, it does not say it. So, in effect, to use (9a) while disbelieving (9b) would
29 be misleading, but it would not be a lie. Could the use of a slur, then, create a
30 conventional implicature that there is something inferior about the group to
31 which the slur applies?

32 One immediate problem with this suggestion is that many philosophers of
33 language insist conventional implicatures are *never* part of what is said. And
34 second, even if the claim is only that the contemptible attitude is encoded
35 in linguistic meaning in manner similar to a conventional implicature, we
36 have already raised objections to this account (see Anderson and Lepore,
37

38 15. One view we do not discuss for the sake of brevity is Williams' (1985) notion of 'thick concepts'.
39 Like Richard, Williams characterizes slurs as terms that combine classification and attitude.
40 But unlike Richard, Williams regards utterances of sentences with slurs as possibly true but
41 objectionably couched. However, if we are required to see the attitude as in some way a part
42 of 'what is said', then William's account will be subject to the same objections raised against
43 Richard.

44 16. Richard's notion of representation is not clear. The claim that one can (mis)represent in a way
45 that precludes evaluation for truth or falsity sounds odd and wildly implausible. Perhaps,
46 Richard has something like pictorial representation in mind. When evaluating, for example, a
47 map, we do not typically use truth or falsity to judge it, but rather appeal to accuracy, for
48 example, "The map is an accurate representation of downtown New Brunswick." Under-
49 standing representation in this way may make his claim sound more plausible.

1 forthcoming). It behooves Richard to provide more detail about what he has in
2 mind by non-truth-conditional aspects of meaning that are still a part of what
3 is said.

4 Also, Richard owes us an explanation of what is going on with slurring
5 sentences that appear to be *bona fide* assertions. When a bigot utters a sentence
6 like 'Jerry Seinfeld is a kike' or 'African-Americans are niggers', he certainly
7 *seems* to be making a statement that is either true or false. Richard denies these
8 statements are truth apt, but not because they are expressives or performatives.
9 He says, "If I say, referring to Smith, 'That asshole is at the door', I display
10 contempt for Smith by calling him an asshole. *That* does not prevent what I say
11 from being true" (34). 'Asshole' is obviously a pejorative used to display con-
12 tempt. In that way it shares a function with slurs. The difference, according to
13 Richard, is that slurs are "intrinsically misrepresenting," while pejoratives like
14 'asshole' are not. He says, "the way assholes behave merits contempt" (34). In
15 response, note that putting things this way already presupposes a certain kind
16 of content for terms like 'asshole', that is, truth-evaluable content. What entitles
17 Richard to this assumption? Isn't this exactly what he is supposed to be
18 establishing?

19 A further worry about Richard's view (and Expressivism, in general) is, as
20 noted earlier, that slurs vary in offense. Prohibitionism has a straightforward
21 way of accounting for this variation. How can Expressivism account for it? It is
22 implausible to suggest that attitudes of different intensity are associated with
23 different slurs. There is no good reason to think users of 'gook' have a more
24 intense attitude of contempt for their target than users of 'cracker' do for theirs.
25 Expressivists, then, are left without a viable explanation of a crucial feature of
26 slurs.

27 Finally, Expressivism does not obviously carry the resources to explicate
28 appropriation. Richard acknowledges that a slur's target can use the term in a
29 nonderogatory way but argues "there is a case to be made that in appropriation
30 there was a meaning change" (16). This response is inadequate since it fails to
31 explain why, for at least some terms (e.g., 'nigger', 'fag', 'bitch'), the appropri-
32 ated sense is not typically available to out-group members.

33 One can imagine Richard responding to this charge by saying that he is not
34 on the hook for explaining why out-group members typically cannot access the
35 appropriated sense. He only needs to show that the in-group uses the slur with
36 a different sense than the derogatory version. He might say, "Sure. The
37 out-group member cannot use the expression. But the reason she cannot is not
38 linguistic; perhaps, it's moral or social. Some non-linguistic norm may bar her
39 from using the slur with its appropriated sense." And this nonlinguistic norm
40 does not show the slur cannot be ambiguous between a derogatory and a
41 nonderogatory sense.

42 Though this strategy may provide hope for other views—depending, that is,
43 on the explanation of the nonlinguistic norm—it does little for Richard—for
44 according to him, the slur would have to be ambiguous between two different
45 *attitudes*. Appropriated uses of the slur express a nonderogatory attitude and
46 slurring uses a derogatory one, but why, then, would it be inappropriate for
47 out-group members to use the appropriated term? How could there be a rule

1 that forbade people to think a certain way? Assuming the attitude is one of
2 solidarity (as is often supposed with appropriated uses), how could there be a
3 rule that forbids that? Thus, expressivism comes up short.

5 V. Inferentialism

6
7 Inferentialism says we should understand slurs in terms of the types of infer-
8 ences they license. Brandom (1994), Dummett (1973), Tirrell (1999), and
9 Whiting (2008) have offered views that appeal to the slur's inferential role to
10 determine its semantics. According to Tirrell, "The meaning of a word or
11 expression is a matter of its various actual and possible sentential roles" (46).
12 Whiting concurs, adding, "that an expression is or would be employed in
13 specific inferences is determinative of its meaning" (375). These "use theories"
14 of meaning claim that the meaning of words is determined by how they are
15 employed in linguistic communities.

16 Applied to slurs, then, their meaning would be unpacked in terms of infer-
17 ences they license. A classic version of Inferentialism is in Dummett, who
18 characterizes the conditions for the slur 'boche' as:¹⁷

19
20 The condition for applying the term to someone is that he is of German
21 nationality; the consequences of its application are that he is barbarous and
22 more prone to cruelty than other Europeans. We should envisage the con-
23 nections in both directions as sufficiently tight as to be involved in the very
24 meaning of the word: neither could be severed without altering its meaning.

25
26 Dummett goes on to say that anyone who "rejects the word does so because he
27 does not want to permit a transition from the grounds for applying the
28 term to the consequences of doing so" (454). A disposition to draw certain
29 inferences—in this instance, the inference that Germans are more prone to
30 cruelty than other Europeans—adequately captures the meaning of a slur, and
31 these inferences explain a nonbigot's objection to the use of slurs.

32 This version of Inferentialism is subject to devastating objections. First, if to
33 understand a term, to grasp a concept is to be disposed to draw certain
34 inferences, then, since nonbigots are *not* disposed to draw these inferences, they
35 cannot understand these terms. But, as Williamson (2003) notes, "We find
36 racist and xenophobic abuse offensive because we understand it, not because
37 we fail to do so" (257).

38 A second objection, also from Williamson, challenges Inferentialism in
39 general. Despite the claim that meaning of an expression is determined by its
40 inferential role, the nonbigot understands a slur prior to any awareness of the
41 inferences it supposedly licenses. Isn't there an antecedent meaning we use to
42 evaluate the propriety of an expression's role in inferential transactions? Thus,
43 in contrast to Dummett, the nonbigot knows the meaning of 'boche' without
44 being disposed to draw certain inferences. This is bad news for Inferentialism.

45
46 17. Dummett (1973), 454.

1 For Inferentialism about slurs to be viable, it has to be that bigots and
2 nonbigots can both grasp the meanings of the same expressions while differing
3 in dispositions and attitudes. Whiting (2008) purports to establish just this by
4 first rejecting the idea that slurs and their neutral counterparts differ in seman-
5 tic content:

6
7 Careful examination of a racist's use of the term 'Boche' might reveal it to
8 mean the same thing as we mean by 'German'. Thus, the meaning of
9 'Boche' is given by whatever inferential rules govern (and thereby determine
10 the meaning of) 'German'. (385)

11
12 On Whiting's version of Inferentialism, a slur and its neutral counterpart share
13 semantic content. The inferences speakers are disposed to draw from uses of
14 'German' are exactly the ones they are disposed to draw with uses of 'boche'.
15 Instead of locating the offense of a slur in semantic content, Whiting proposes
16 we place it in the pragmatics of its uses. He says, "Inferentialism deals with that
17 aspect of a word that is shared by its neutral counterpart (e.g., 'German') and
18 an additional Gricean apparatus is wheeled in to explain the respect in which
19 it causes offense" (385). The offense of slurs has to do with "offensive associa-
20 tions" rather than with semantics.

21 One might be skeptical about this "defense" of Inferentialism. An account of
22 conventional implicature consistent with Inferentialism is needed; Whiting
23 does not provide one.¹⁸ Besides this worry, we have raised objections to a
24 conventional implicature account (see Anderson and Lepore, forthcoming) that
25 if correct undermine Whiting's appeal. We noted that Bach (1999) and others
26 have cast doubt on the existence of conventional implicatures. Bach maintains
27 that (10), but not (11), is a correct report of (9a):

28
29 (9a) John is British but brave.

30 (10) Frank said that John is British but brave.

31 (11) Frank said that John is British and brave.

32
33 But if 'and' cannot be used to correctly report Frank's utterance of (9a), then,
34 contrary to Grice, the contrast expressed by 'but' is not merely implied, but
35 part of what is *said*.

36 Another objection not only of Whiting's Inferentialism, but of all other
37 versions as well is based on the fact that slurs admit of nonderogatory uses. In
38 order for Inferentialism to extend to appropriated uses of slurs, it must be
39 shown how standard inferential transactions licensed by the term get nullified
40 when used by particular users. This would presumably mean assigning a
41 different set of inferential licenses based on the identity of the language user;
42 one set for out-group members, a different one for in-group members. This is
43 further complicated by the fact that in-group members are capable of slurring
44 other in-group members. So, in addition to identifying these sets, an Inferen-
45 tialist must tell a story about how in-group members relate to both sets, as well
46

47
18. He does hint at a possible account in fn. 21.

1 as how the occasional out-group member obtains access to the set of appro-
2 priation inferences. This is a tall order.

4 VI. Externalism and Others

5
6 Finally, there is a constellation of views that attempt to locate the offense of
7 slurs in literal content. Hom (2008) adopts, roughly, the view that the linguistic
8 meaning of an expression is partially determined by factors external to the
9 speaker. A slur's derogatory content is semantically determined by social insti-
10 tutions (430), which Hom models with two components: an *ideology* and a *set of*
11 *practices*.

12
13 An ideology is a set of (usually) negative beliefs about a particular group of
14 people. For racism towards Chinese people, the ideology might include
15 beliefs such as: that Chinese people have slanted eyes, that Chinese people 6
16 are devious, that Chinese people are good at laundering, and so on. In
17 general, the set of racist practices can range from impolite social treatment
18 to genocide.¹⁹

19
20 On Hom's account—*Combinatorial Externalism* (CE)—a slur's meaning is distinct
21 from its neutral counterpart's. A slur's negative content is determined by social
22 institutions. CE maintains Prohibitionism fails to account for all of a slur's
23 content since it denies slurs necessarily differ in content from their neutral
24 counterparts.

25 CE faces numerous problems (some raised in this volume both by Jeshion
26 and Camp). We mention only one further objection.²⁰ As we noted earlier,
27 co-referring slurs can and do vary in offensive force. Hom tries to account for
28 this variation by appealing to the pervasiveness of the racist institution that
29 backs the slur. However, this strategy cannot work. To account for variation,
30 Hom would have to propose distinct institutions for each slur, which is implau-
31 sible. It is difficult to see how else Hom's externalist view could account for this
32 important datum.

33 Another semantic challenger is Camp. According to her, there is a close
34 relationship between a slurring expression and a *perspective*, that is, “an inte-
35 grated, intuitive way of thinking about members of the targeted group” (this
36 volume, 6). She regards this relationship as *semantic*, offering the contrast 7
37 between the following sentences as evidence:

38
39 19. Hom (2008), 431.

40 20. We briefly mention another worry. In Hom and May (this volume) they give the following
41 semantics:

$$\begin{aligned} \forall(X,Y) &= T \text{ iff } X \cap Y = X & \text{ 15 } \\ \exists(X,Y) &= T \text{ iff } X \cap Y \neq \emptyset \\ \nexists(X,Y) &= T \text{ iff } X \cap Y = \emptyset \end{aligned}$$

42
43 Notice that the clause for the universal yields the following result, ‘All chinks are spics’, given
44 that the intersection of chink and spic are trivially identical to chink (since Hom and May claim
45 slurs' extensions are null). This is an unwelcome result.
46
47
48

- 1 (12) They gave the job I applied for to a spic.
2 (13) They gave job I applied for to a Hispanic.
3

4 Camp claims (13) could give rise to certain negative implications that can be
5 canceled if the speaker does not mean to signal any bad or negative feelings
6 toward Hispanics. On the contrary, she claims, the same is not possible with
7 (12). A speaker, in using a slur, signals “his allegiance to a certain perspective
8 . . . in an overt and nondefeasible way, precisely in virtue of employing that
9 expression” (11). The stubbornness of the purported perspective in (12) is
10 supposed to signal the presence of a *semantic* rather than a *pragmatic* feature. The
11 charge from Camp, then, will be that Prohibitionism does not account for this
12 crucial perspectival component she has identified.

13 Jeshion (this volume) raises a number of objections to Camp’s view as well;
14 we will mention two of our own. First, it seems Camp’s view is subject to the
15 same objection we raised against Hom, namely, it fails to explain variation in
16 offense among co-referring slurs. If Camp is correct, the use of any slur for a
17 group should signal the same allegiance to a particular perspective, and thus,
18 evoke the same offensive force. But this is not so. And second, it appears
19 Camp’s view is subject to objections she herself raises against the claim that
20 slurs conventionally express contempt. She rejects this view because (i) a
21 speaker can consistently deny feeling contempt or negative feelings toward the
22 target, and (ii) some people who use slurs do not take them to express contempt,
23 but rather they are just the correct terms for picking out members of the
24 targeted group. But, then, why couldn’t the same be said of her perspectives?
25 A speaker could conceivably deny allegiance to a negative perspective in her
26 use of a slur. And certainly we can conceive of users of slurs who believe they
27 are the appropriate terms to use and who do not think they signal any
28 allegiance to a negative perspective.²¹ If these objections stand up, then Pro-
29 hibitionism has not missed anything in not assigning a role to semantic content
30 in its explanation of a slur’s offense.

31 32 VII. Conclusion

33
34 Throughout this essay we have maintained that *Prohibitionism* better explains
35 the offenses created by the uses of slurs than its competitors do. We have done
36 this by extolling the virtues of Prohibitionism—that is, its ability to explain
37 the difference in offense among slurs, both among various groups and
38 co-referentially, as well as a plausible explanation of appropriation—and by
39 highlighting the shortcomings of its competitors. We addressed persistent issues
40 raised by its opponents, for example, why Prohibitionism does not get the order
41 of explanation wrong. We argued there are situations where the prohibition is
42 the *genesis* of the offense rather than its result. A remaining issue that we have
43 not definitively addressed here concerns the definition of a slur. We believe the
44

45 21. For example, this individual might be someone who thinks objecting to being called by a name
46 is a display of oversensitivity and “PC nonsense.”

1 worries flagged for various attempts at defining the category show that the task
2 will not be easy. Appealing solely to function or content risks enlarging the
3 category beyond recognition.
4

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