

The Social Life of Slurs

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Abstract

The words we call slurs are just plain vanilla descriptions like *cowboy* and *coal scuttle*. They don't semantically convey 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 "thick terms" that mix categorization and attitude, nor are they semantically the direct expressions of strong emotion. What distinguishes pairs like *kraut* and *German* is a difference of metadata rather than meaning: the former is the conventional description for Germans among Germanophobes when they are speaking in that capacity, in the same way *swerve!* is the conventional expression that some teenagers use for "Oh, joy!" when they're stressing that social identity. To use a slur is to exploit the Maxim of Manner (or Levinson's M-Principle) to assert one's affiliation with a group that has a disparaging attitude towards the slur's referent. This account is sufficient to explain all the familiar properties of slurs, such as their speaker orientation and "nondetachability." It also explains some of their unexplored features, such as the variation in tone and strength among the different slurs for a particular group and the role of slurs in shaping the social identity of their users, all with no need of additional linguistic mechanisms.

An earlier version of this paper was circulated under the name "Slurs Aren't Special."

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

Quentin Skinner, “The Idea of a Cultural Lexicon”

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 to philosophers and linguists before they took on a symbolic role in the culture wars that broke out in and around the academy in the 1980s.¹ 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 meanings 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’

¹ That isn’t to say that the sorts of words we now call slurs have been ignored. 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); more recent treatments include (Henderson, 2003), (Mieder, 1996) and (Bright, 2000) (see also (Kennedy, 2002)). Slurs have also figured in work on racist and homophobic discourse by linguists (e.g., (Murphy, 1997), (Zwicky, 1997), (Hill, 2009)), sociologists (e.g., (Allen, 1983), (Eliasoph, 1999s), (Weaver, 2011)) and social psychologists (e.g., (Greenberg, 1988), (Rappoport, 2005)). But until recently, the subject has played no 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 choice of the quaint epithet *boche* as an example suggested a disinclination to connect these questions to their sociopolitical significance, notwithstanding his personal engagement in these issues.

attention to the words in the first place. But many like 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 those 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.

In fact, *slur* is one of those culturally saturated keywords—words that are "strong, difficult, and persuasive," as Raymond Williams (Williams, 1976) described them—that call out for thick description. The word is both more specific and more value-laden than a term like *derogative*. 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," 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. For a word to count as a slur, moreover, its evaluation has to be considered unwarranted. Most of us would be reluctant to describe the French *facho* for "fascist" or the label *clamheads* for Scientologists as slurs: the words may derogate the members of the groups it refers to, but we feel they have coming.

The third feature of slurs is connected to the other 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 only to say 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. In that sense, the slur as such is a new addition to the moral 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. Not that those actions don't merit reproach, but the contemporary words diagnose them in terms of an inapposite moral frame.

In its cultural thickness, *slur* is of a piece with 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.² The new framework implies a doctrine of linguistic self-determination, which entails that every group should have the right to determine what it should—and, even 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 these concepts couldn't have existed in the absence of 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 of old ones.³ But the emergence of *slur* in Anglophone cultures puts the conceptual revisions in relief.

² 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 mental disposition, but could refer to active discrimination, as in “housing bias,”

³ Making allowances, we can discern similar attitudes toward certain derogative words in other Western language communities, whether or not they have a specific word for the category. When the Italian philosopher Claudia Bianchi published a survey of the literature in the Italian semiotics journal *E/C*, she entitled it “Slurs: Un'introduzione” (Bianchi, to appear). We can read in that title an acknowledgment not just that *slur* has no precise translation in Italian, where such items are usually described with the more general *spregiativi*, but also that *slur* has

The Mechanisms of Slurs

For all its cultural specificity, of course, slurs clearly rely on some more general linguistic ploy or device—it's not as if the possibility of using words to judge people in virtue of the groups they belong to didn't arise until modern English developed an app for them. It's that mechanism, whatever it is, that is the proper object of linguistic description. But the notion of a slur has become so much a part of the cultural wallpaper that in the course of abstracting to a general semantic type, we run the risk of naturalizing what are in fact local or contingent features of the words we call slurs. That naturalizing urge is reinforced by an understandable desire to frame our accounts so we can bring them directly to bear on the questions that give slurs their urgency. The hope—a misplaced one, I think—is that we should be able to read the moral implications of slurs right off the linguistic surface.

In fact there's no reason to assume that whatever linguistic mechanism or process is at work with slurs is specific to the features that distinguish slurs as a cultural category. The mechanism needn't be restricted to words denoting certain social types, such as racial or religious groups, or to words that convey a negative judgment of their referents. But in one form or another, those assumptions have worked their way into most accounts of these words. These accounts semanticize the social functions of slurs, for example by transforming their cultural functions into linguistic features that make pejoratives out of terms denoting certain social groups (see (Hom & May, 2013)) or into one that makes a term the expression of a particular affect, such as contempt, for the members of a group (see, e.g., (Jeshion, 2013a), Croom (Croom, 2013)).

These approaches allow us to treat slurs as a purely semantic phenomenon, at a remove from their actual contexts of use. Discussions tend to focus on a small set of prototypical examples—invariably the ur-slur *nigger*, the obsolete *boche*, some word that singles out the gender or ethnicity of the writer, or sometimes the circumspect meta-slur S*, in the understanding that slurs are differentiated from one another only by their relative intensity and that the linguistic and social conclusions drawn about any one of them will be valid for the rest. These examples in turn are usually presented in in the sorts of constructed sentences that live out their entire lives on scholars' blackboards, in secession from lived reality. The idea is

an application in that language even so. One indirect sign of that is in the wide cross-linguistic diffusion 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.

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—that we can introspectively determine what the speaker conveys when he utters the words by burrowing down into our own idiolects. The problem here is that where slurs are concerned, there really are no idiolects, just implicit ethnographic hypotheses. The sparer and more decontextualized the examples, the more likely it is that our judgments about them will be colored by our cultural preoccupations.

I'll be arguing here that these semanticized approaches come at a double cost. They lead to linguistic accounts that don't generalize to the variety of slurs and the range of their uses. And for that reason, they're generally too schematic and reductive to shed much light on the contemporary practices and ideologies that surround these words, which was what spurred a lot of the interest in the topic in the first place. Most of the linguistic and philosophical literature on slurs serves rather to confirm our understanding of racism than to advance it. In what follows, I'll try to show that we arrive a clearer picture of slurs when we consider a wider range of words and specific and textured social practices that they're steeped in; that is, that thick description can be the friend of theory.

In part because I'll be offering a wholly novel approach to slurs and in part because I'll be considering a wider range of phenomena than is usual, it will take me a while to develop my arguments, so it will be useful to outline the structure of the paper. In the following section, I'll sketch out the family of "semanticist" views that characterize virtually all linguistic and philosophical analyses of slurs. I'll then discuss the shortcomings of these approaches, whether they are representationalist or expressivist, in the light of both familiar observations and some other considerations that haven't figured in these discussions—for example, the existence of multiple slurs for a single group and the varied roles slurs play in shaping the social identities of the groups that use them. I'll then turn to developing a positive account of slurs as a type of conversational implicatures, one related to other conversational maneuvers that I call "ventriloquistic." This analysis, I argue, is sufficient to explain all of the ostensibly "semantic" properties of slurs, such as the difficulty of canceling their pejorative force and their tendency to be speaker-oriented. I'll show how this implicature generates the evaluative force of slurs and their capacity to offend both their targets and third-party listeners on. In concluding sections I'll show how this account accommodates the facts of appropriated use and say a word about the phonetic toxicity that affects a few strong slurs, which some have credited, incorrectly, for the derogative force of slurs in general.

Semanticizing Slurs

A linguistic account of slurs should tell us three things: what the words do, how they do it, and how the second follows from the first—that is, why the function of slurs as such should involve one or another particular mechanism. Ideally, whatever characteristic behavior slurs seem to manifest—for example, the apparent nondefeasibility of their derogative import—ought to follow from their social use, without requiring any functionally unmotivated formal apparatus.

The question of what slurs do has three parts. First, what does the use of a slur communicate or indicate about its target over and above simply identifying a particular group—what is what I’ll call the slur’s import? This question has dominated all discussions of the phenomenon, as people argue over whether the slur represents or describes the members of a group or whether it merely expresses the speaker’s feelings about them. But there is also a second question about the import of slurs: what do they convey about the person who uses them? This issue has been almost wholly ignored in the literature, beyond representing the archetypal utterer of a slur as “the racist,” as if the communicative function of the words was fully discharged in expressing the speaker’s antipathy for its targets. But we’ll see here that these two questions are intimately connected, and that one can’t give a satisfactory answer to the first without giving serious attention to the second.

The third question about a slur’s import is how certain strong derogatives come by the expressive impact that I’ll call their sting—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”? People generally assume that the answer to this third question is implicit in the answer to the first: a slur is hurtful to the people it targets either because of what it says about them or because it manifests the speaker’s contempt for them. But that’s not at all obvious. The interesting thing about a strong slur like *nigger* is that its power to offend seems to exceed any injury that most speakers could inflict simply by declaring their beliefs or attitudes about blacks. So the two questions, of import and sting, are in principle distinct.

Whatever one considers the effect of slurs to be, there’s widespread agreement as to how they achieve it, at least at the topmost level. Almost every account of slurs attributes their import to features of their conventional linguistic meanings, whether as additional content, conventional implicatures, or presuppositions, which serve to distinguish a slur from a non-slurring descriptive equivalent. (An apparent exception is Anderson and Lepore’s (Anderson & Lepore, 2013) “prohibition” theory, but we’ll see that their account merely finesses this question.) People debate whether this or that semantic mechanism is best suited to produce the

effects associated with the words or to predict their apparent idiosyncrasies, but no one steps 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.⁴

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, 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, and that semantic accounts of the meanings of slurs fail to satisfy all of the criteria I've mentioned. They mischaracterize the actual effects of the words and the source of their expressive power, as well as the social processes that determine those effects. They introduce formal mechanisms that have no functional motivation and that don't account for the way the words are actually used. What's more, they come up short sociolinguistically: they posit linguistic conventions where no convention could obtain, or ask conventions to get words to do things couldn't actually be conventional.

I'll expand these criticisms of semanticist accounts in the following sections. But 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 one could tell. Slurs and words like them are just plain vanilla descriptions like *cowboy* and *coal scuttle*, 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 (Bernard Williams' "thick terms") that mix categorization and attitude, such as *bigot*, *boor*, or *toady*, or for that matter,

⁴ 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 & 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.

the label *slur* itself.⁵ 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 reactions 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 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 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. Racists don't use slurs because they're derogative; slurs are derogative because they're the words that racists use.

⁵ I prefer "appraisive" to "thick," both because it more directly suggests the function of the words and because the opposition to "thin" terms that don't describe but merely judge, even if that distinction is well taken, isn't relevant here. This use of "appraisive" is originally due to Gallie (Gallie, 1955), I believe, but I have in mind its use by Quentin Skinner (Skinner, 1979), for whom grasping the criteria of application of such words involves understanding both their referential meanings and the sorts of speech-acts they can be used to perform (e.g., of commending or expressing approval). For my purposes, though, what matters is only that the evaluative function of these words is built into their linguistic meanings. It is in virtue of the conventions of English, that is, that to call someone a toady is to disparage him.

Slurs as “Prejudicials”

I'll be focusing here on slurs and analogous derogative terms. But on my view, slurs as such are not a natural linguistic or pragmatic class. And once we accept that slurs are just descriptions that have no distinctive semantic properties, they can't be lumped with expressives, appraisive terms or other categories that convey an evaluation or an attitude via their conventional meanings. Rather, the classification has to be made on pragmatic grounds, grouping slurs with other words whose extra-denotative import results from an exploitation of the same conversational maneuver that gives slurs their effect, a category of expressions I'll describe as prejudicials. This class of words turns out to be quite broad. It includes not just 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 social status, like *bougie* and *pleb*; or for their political orientation, like *commie*, *libtard*, *repug(lican)*, French *facho* for fascists, and what Republicans like to style as “the Democrat Party.” There are prejudicial proper names, such as La La Land for Los Angeles, Slick Willie for Bill Clinton, Faux News for Fox News, and a whole phonebook of soubriquets for Barack Obama, including Obumma, Oblowme, ObeyMe, Obozo—or simply Barack Hussein Obama, which makes pretty much the same point as the others do. There are political prejudicials, both negative and positive, such as *death tax* and *free enterprise*. There are approbative prejudicials that convey respect or approval, such as *jurist*, *warfighter*, and *public servant*. 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 notion of societally divided opinion that it exploits. But the phenomenon is very general in the languages of socially complex speech-communities.

Missing Meanings

What do slurs communicate? On the representationalist view, they convey or encode pernicious stereotypes about the groups or things they identify. In the light of the general acceptance of the semanticist hypothesis, that entails that such stereotypes are part of the words' conventional linguistic meanings. 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 accepted in much of 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.

Varieties of this picture have been proposed by Beller (Beller, 2013), Tirrell (Tirrell, 1999), Williamson (Williamson, 2009), and Croom (Croom, 2013). Hom (Hom, 2008) has developed this approach in some detail.⁶ As Hom tells the story, the content of a slur spells out 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 to make a false assertion, because there are no chinks; the word has an empty extension. We can leave aside for the moment the unlikelihood that any speaker has all of this in mind when he uses the word, or that he would even agree with most of it if you asked him—Hom explains that via an appeal to a kind of externalism that I’ll come to later. The basic thesis, as I noted earlier, is that *Chinese* and *chink* differ in content in virtue of the addition of pejorative content to the latter.

Hom’s 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 college student who tells a friend, “I’ll get the midterm guide from the chink who sits next to me in class” 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 anything? You may be able to infer something about how student feels 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.

⁶ In more recent work, Hom and May (Hom & May, 2013), (Hom & May, 2014) take a different tack, assigning 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” still have different truth-conditions.

A second group of objections involves the interaction of slurs with various operators. These have been widely noted; see, among others, (DiFranco), (Jeshion, 2013b), (Sennet & Copp, 2014) and (Rappaport). Hom's 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."⁷ 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. "Oskar isn't a kraut" can only mean that Oskar isn't German, not that he's not cruel. Potts (Potts, 2005) describes this phenomenon by saying that the content of such words is "scopeless"; I prefer to say that it simply isn't there. When we hear somebody described with a prejudicial, that is, we don't interpret the speaker as having predicated anything about either him or the class he belongs to over and above his membership in it.

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.⁸ 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 fall afoul of its

⁷ Hom and May argue that the offensiveness of sentences like this one 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 entail, implausibly, that the offensiveness of "There are kikes in the building" and "There are no kikes in the building" requires two explanations, one semantic and one pragmatic. (See Jeshion (Jeshion, 2013b)).

⁸ Among those who have advocated or entertained this view are (Boisvert, 2008) (Williamson, 2009), (Copp, 2001), (Finlay, 2004), (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.)

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 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 proposal. 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? And why don't we see similar effects with other kinds of stereotypes? Why is it hard to imagine an English word *klownd*, for example, which is denotatively identical to *clown*, but which conventionally implicates that clowns are sad and pathetic? (That's how people sometimes use the word *pagliacci*, except that in that case the pathos is part of what is asserted rather than conventionally implicated, so that it can fall under the scope of negation, as in "Krusty isn't a pagliacci, he's a cheerful soul.")⁹ If so, why not—what do these quirks of meaning and use have to do with derogative words and the practices that surround them? By contrast, I'll be arguing here that there's a direct connection between the particular kinds of evaluations that prejudicials are used to express and the conversational maneuver that enables people to express them.

The other objections are empirical, and apply to all representationalist accounts, whether the stereotype is made part of the at-issue content or a conventional implicature. Advocates 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

⁹ 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 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).

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. Someone could say, “You know, these boches get a bum rap. They’re actually a kind and gentle 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 definitive about the properties of either Oskar in particular or Germans in general.

The second empirical 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.¹⁰ And similarly for “Commies are devious”—or “godless,” or “fanatical,” or “ruthless,” or whatever you take the stereotypically invidious traits of communists to be—which a militant anti-communist wouldn’t find so redundant as to not need saying. Someone who speaks of free enterprise presumably holds that unregulated 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, just 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

¹⁰ As Jeshion (Jeshion, 2013b) observes, “‘Chinks should be subject to higher admissions standards’ is not an analytic truth.”

contrast with the appraisive 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?"

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 appraisive 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 appraisive 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 grouped with slurs, and they unquestionably draw on the same kinds of social attitudes that words like *coon*, *yid* and *beaner* do.¹¹ 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" or "Sluts tend to be unchaste." 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." For the present I'll be using *slur* only for words like *nigger* and *wop*.

The Priority of Attitude

These arguments should suffice to show that slurs and other prejudicials don't contain any more descriptive content than their default synonyms do: *redskin* and (*American*) *Indian* both contain only as much information as is required to pick out their common referent. Granted, the use of *redskin* is more likely to foreground negative stereotypes of American Indians than the use of *Indian* is, and indeed, that's often the purpose of using a derogative word. Stereotypes, negative and positive, are among the cognitive shortcuts we rely on to make sense of the world. So one can understand the temptation to say that such stereotypes are

¹¹ People very often use *slur* to cover pejorative appraisive 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. The distinctions can be subtle; as we'll see, for example, *bitch* behaves very differently when it is an appraisive term for an unpleasant woman and when it is simply a slighting term for a woman of any type. (Allen (Allen, 1983) uses "slurring nicknames" to distinguish the prototypical derogatives like *nigger*. But the present-day connotations of *nickname* are too amicable to make it appropriate here.)

semantically attached to the word—maybe not in the form of the elaborate bill of particulars that Hom suggests, but as some subset of the traits that people commonly associate with the group. Think of this as the cluster theory of stereotypes.

But even in that case, we'd be left with the puzzle of why the stereotypes associated with a word like *chink* are invariably derogative. After all, racial stereotypes may be deplorable, but they're 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 regarded as positive or negative on a given occasion. On Monday it's "You have to give it to the chinks; they work hard"; on Tuesday it's "No wonder those damn chinks all get A's—they don't do anything but study until two in the morning." Whatever ethnic traits a given utterance of the word *chink* brings to mind, if any, are just those that are contextually consistent with an antecedent attitude of condescension or contempt. And as we saw, one can convey such an attitude even while asserting the virtues of the target group. The speaker who says "Whatever you may have heard, the krauts are really a

gentle and sensitive people” isn’t repudiating the attitude that’s implicit in the slur, just contesting the stereotype that other people invoke to justify it.¹²

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. As Walter Lippmann wrote in *Public Opinion*, the influential 1922 book that introduced the notion of the stereotype into American intellectual discourse: “[T]he hallmark of the perfect stereotype is that it precedes the use of reason; is a form of perception, imposes a certain character on the data of our senses before the data reach the intelligence” (Lippmann, 1922).¹³

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 occupiers, 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

¹² Simon Blackburn (Blackburn, 1992) misses this point when he writes that while *kraut* is a term of abuse used by some Englishmen for Germans,

...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*, even if it’s no longer colored deep national hostility. Compare the adjective *Gallic*, which is airily condescending even when it’s being used to praise the French for their charm or their *savoir-faire*.

¹³ Camp (Camp, 2013) straddles the expressivist and representationalist positions by saying that slurs are associated with particular “perspectives”: “modes of interpretation: open-ended ways of thinking, feeling, and more generally engaging with the world ... Above all, perspectives are ongoing dispositions to structure one’s thoughts, along at least two dimensions.” Copp develops this notion in richer detail than I can summarize here, but I should note that it doesn’t escape any of the criticisms of semanticism I’m offering here.

scheming mind, flashy trickiness, artful dodging and general smart-aleckness” (Sclar & 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 particular pretexts we give for it.¹⁴

True, certain derogatives may bring specific stereotypes to mind. Sometimes the stereotype is suggested by the name itself, particularly when it’s derived from a description—Slick Willie for Bill Clinton, *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 bring to mind 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*, *nip*, *Jap*, and *gook*. Even then, though, the point of the stereotype is to legitimate a certain affective attitude: as used by a Tommy, *boche* didn’t usually presuppose just that the Germans were cruel, but that their cruelty made them so contemptible as to deserve killing.

Many Slurs, One Target

The priority of attitude may be easiest to see when there are multiple slurs for a single group, a phenomenon that has been almost wholly ignored in this literature. 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 it doesn’t follow that the intensity of a slur can be predicted solely on the basis of the degree of racism or bias that confronts its targets. Consider

¹⁴ As Jeshion (Jeshion, 2013b) puts this point:

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.”

the differences among the multiple disparagements for the same group, such as *nigger*, *coon*, *spade*, *jigaboo*, *spook*, and *jungle bunny* for blacks and *fag(got)*, *queer*, *pansy*, *poof*, *fairy*, *fruit* and *homo* for gays.¹⁵ These words vary in intensity, independent of the racism or homophobia that confronts their targets. But they don't necessarily differ in the stereotypes they evoke. 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*. In fact it can happen that two words for a group assign dramatically different evaluations to the same stereotypical traits. *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.

The multiplication of slurs for a given group reminds us of their primary role as tokens of group identity. The literature on slurs focuses almost exclusively on their use to disparage and injure their targets, but only a tiny proportion of the utterances of these words are directly aimed at members of the group they target. They're far more commonly exchanged between people who share or pretend to share the attitudes they imply. This makes sense; as a general rule, one spends much more time talking about outsiders than to them. People have numerous motives for using slurs among the other members of their group: 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. Adolescent boys who throw the word *fag* around loosely aren't focused on disparaging homosexual men so much as communing with each other over their own macho heterosexuality. Or sometimes, as Jane Hill notes, the use of the words signal a "a tough, hyper-masculine register of American English, where [slurs] are

¹⁵ Henderson (Henderson, 2003) notes that the *Oxford English Dictionary Online* lists 21 words for blacks that are labeled as "disparaging" or "offensive," while the *American Heritage Fourth Edition* lists 14. Online sources list many more; the online Racial Slur Database includes more than 600, the vast majority of them fleeting or obscure.

emblematic of straight talk and the right to unconstrained and ‘irreverent’ expression” ((Hill, 2009), see also (Eliasoph, 1999)).

Whatever the speakers’ immediate motives for using the words, though, the use of slurs always implies a particular self-conception of the group that coins or owns them. As the sociologists Joe Feagin, Hernan Vera and Pinar Batur (Feagin, Vera, & Batur, 2000) have noted, “racialized attitudes and actions require not only a representation of the stereotyped other but also a representation of oneself.” In fact the differences between the tonalities of the multiple slurs for a group often convey more about the people who use them than about their targets. 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 homosexuals or *ikey*, *mockie* and *sheenie* for Jews). Like slang, these words are often 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 money or sex.¹⁶ And it’s why slurs often manifest what Irving Allen calls a “low comedy” that enhances their appeal as tokens of common sensibility—*jungle bunny* and *spearchucker* for blacks, *mackerel-snapper* for Catholics, *towelhead* and *camel jockey* for Arabs, *Jew canoe* for a Cadillac, and so forth (see (Howitt, 2005) (Rappoport, 2005)). As Allen notes, 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... the echoes and re-echoes of historical situations, of issues wrangled over, and of the very incidents of contention.”

Are Expressive Attitudes Conventional?

These observations should be kept in mind when we ask what exactly are the attitudes that slurs convey about their referents. On most expressivist accounts, which like representationalist accounts are generally based on a few prototypical slurs, all slurs are associated with a single negative affect, say of contempt or disdain, which they convey in virtue of their linguistic meanings. That view can be framed in various ways: one could say that the convention for using *wop* involves representing Italians as being contemptible on

¹⁶ It’s an open question whether slurs should be classified a slang, a category that’s notoriously hard to pin down. Standard dictionaries of English slang like Jonathan Lighter’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)). On the other hand, some slurs, such as *jungle bunny*, are clearly slangier than others, such as *nigger*. Indeed, it’s reasonable to assume that the former is more often a substitution for the latter than for a nonslurring term like *Negro* or *black*.

account of their being Italian or representing them contemptuously as Italian, or alternatively, that the convention has one component that picks out Italians and another expresses contempt for them as Italians.¹⁷ Whatever the differences among these views, they're equivalent in packing a single attitude into the conventional meaning of all these words.

There are several reasons for being skeptical about these proposals—in fact I'll be arguing below that such conventions couldn't exist. It's worth noting that many of the same arguments that make a semantic treatment problematic for the representationalist view create problems for expressivist views, as well. Like the stereotypes that the use of a slur can evoke, for example, the attitude it conveys can be explicitly reinforced without creating a sense of tautology, which would be puzzling if the attitude were inherent in the term's conventional meaning. An utterance like “Wops are detestable” 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 problem goes deeper. 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. How should one describe the affect associated with the hipster's *spade*, for example? To its users, it implied the hipster's self-conception as the “White Negro,” in the title of Norman Mailer's famous essay, and the attachment to jazz, marijuana, and “cool.” To pack all of this into the word's conventional meaning would be to reproduce a big chunk of the cultural history of the 1950s avant-garde and its influences, whereas capturing the attitudes implicit in *coon* would take us back to its origins in late nineteenth-century minstrelsy. Things are no less complicated if we try sort out the distinctions of affect associated with *Guido*, *guinea* and *wop*; *fag*, *queer* and *pansy*; or *redneck*, *peckerwood*, and *cracker*.

It could be argued that the conventions for using these words don't have to mention all their social implications; perhaps they 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. 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

¹⁷ For varieties of these views, see e.g., (McCready, 2010), (Saka, 2007), (Blackburn, 1984), (Richard, 2008), and (Jeshion, 2013a) among others.

unfamiliar with the term. This is roughly the 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 all derogation is the result of the application of a single operator.

But these attitudes can’t always be reduced even to minimal polarities like “negative” and “positive.” There are often discrepancies between the evaluation of the referent that users of the word claim to be conveying and the evaluation perceived by its targets. What polarity would we assign to the attitude expressed by *spade*, for example? The word certainly wasn’t intended contemptuously—Ken Kesey described it as a “term of endearment,” and Chester Anderson went so far as to say, “the spades... are our spiritual fathers.” (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 positive evaluation of blacks.” But many blacks regarded the word as condescending and obtuse, as manifesting an attitude that one critic paraphrased as, “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). It’s a fair bet that most of us now would probably agree with those critics—contemporary dictionaries all label this use of *spade* as offensive or disparaging. But how would we translate what the critics were saying into a statement about of the content of the convention for using the word? 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. (After all, how could a convention prescribe unwitting behavior?) But they also weren’t claiming that the hipsters were in fact conveying 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 the meaning of the word.

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 their name. Critics charge the name is offensive, but 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 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 Trademark Trial and Appeals Board of the US Patent and Trademark Office.¹⁸

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 way? Or are they are conforming to a convention that prescribes using the word respectfully, and in that case why shouldn’t dictionaries and the TTAB acknowledge the fact? 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 name, that discourse demonstrates that “these were people who stood, fought and died and did not whimper” (Buchanan, 2013).¹⁹ Others watch the same movies that Buchanan did and conclude that attitude the word expresses in those sources is 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 in fact such discrepancies between intention and reception are quite common, not just with prejudicials but with other words denoting social categories. Think of various usages of *lady*, *gal* and *girl* (as in “I’ll have my gal set up a meeting”) or of outmoded default terms like *colored*, *half-breed*, *mulatto*, *Oriental* and in

¹⁸ In June of 2014 the TTAB 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, a decision that was upheld on appeal in August of 2015.

¹⁹ A unique feature of *redskin* is that the stereotypes it brings to mind are associated with the Plains Indians 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. That is, the word imputes historical stereotypes of bloodthirstiness and savagery to contemporary Indians as well.

certain regions, *Spanish* for Latinos, all of them considered neutral or respectful by many of the speakers who still use them and disrespectful or clueless by most of the rest of us. Or think of the various terms associated with physical and mental disabilities. Does the 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. Even when terms are unequivocally negative, as with many prototypical slurs, there are considerable ranges of variation that would have to be filled in by pragmatic inferences. But if such inferences are capable of sorting out the nuanced distinctions among *spook*, *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?

The larger point isn’t simply that the evaluations associated with these terms can’t be the content of the conventions for using them, but that they’re derivative and often-secondary effects. A prejudicial acquires its import from its connection to the attitudes toward its referent that are associated with its more-or-less specific sociohistorical provenance, and both its intended and received interpretations arise as readings of those attitudes. That is, the import of a slur or prejudicial word is a product of the history of its use and its connection to a particular community or provenance.

The point may seem obvious, but people often miss its implications. People who focus on the malicious effects of prototypical slurs such as *nigger* and *faggot*, are apt to stress their broad role as political instruments. Tirrell describes them as “enforcers of a system that keeps some people from full participation in their communities, that keeps some voices from being heard”; Allen points to their function as means of controlling outgroups “by neutralizing their efforts to gain resources and influence values.” These are apt descriptions of one of the functions of some terms for socially marginalized outgroups (you wouldn’t try to extend them to *limey* or *frog*). But it’s a mistake to conclude from that that you have exhausted the significance of a slur when you’ve connected it to the broader apparatus of systematic racism, sexism, or homophobia, for example—a move that deprives the variation in the use of these words of any independent interest.

Slurs are obviously caught up in a fabric of social attitudes. But like all popular language, slurs arise from the ground up and reflect the varied textures of people’s immediate experience. Where there are multiple slurs for a group, they are usually the expression of distinct experiences, each associated with a distinct social identity and a different set of

attitudes toward the target of the word. So we want to address slurs in both their linguistic and social specificity—how exactly does the use of this word evoke that provenance and what are the implications of making the connection?

Slurs as Conversational Implicatures

The Counterpart Condition

On the semanticist view, slurs acquire their derogatory powers from their conventional meanings, rather than via a conversational implicature. Yet when it comes to defining 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 semantic 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; 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. Notably, the 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” 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.”

On consideration, the conjunction of the two prongs of the standard definition of slurs raises some puzzles. Let's say we accept that *boche* semantically conveys a disparagement of Germans, by one or another means. Then what if the word *German* and all its conventional synonyms should suddenly disappear from the language—such things have been known to occur—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”²⁰ 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. Yet we have a strong sense that words can only function as slurs if the language offers a nonslurring synonymous word—a word, not just a referentially equivalent descriptive phrase.²¹ (There are a few exceptions to this generalization, which I’ll come to below.) Note that there’s no such counterpart effect with pejorative appraisive words, which often lack nonpejorative lexical synonyms. The pejorative force of *toady* or *goon* isn’t attenuated by the absence of a word that denotes a dependent who is not sycophantic or an enforcer who is not brutal.

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, since the speaker has presumably chosen not to use “kill,” whereas “cause X to laugh” is not, since there is no single verb that expresses that relation. 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?

To resolve these apparent contradictions, we’ll want to first rethink the relation between a slur and its nonslurring synonym. To describe the latter as a “counterpart” misrepresents what is going on (and so, as we’ll see, does “neutral”). “Counterpart” seems to put both words at the same level. That’s how we might talk about the difference between describing someone tendentiously as a weirdo and describing him noncommittally as an eccentric, where there’s no normative expectation that one or the other term will be used. But when someone uses a

²⁰ In the classic case, two word-classes undergo a phonetic merger so as to create a homonymic clash, in which case one word of a pair of homonyms will be abandoned to avoid ambiguity and replaced by a referentially equivalent description. (See (Matthews, 2007))

²¹ 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 lexicalized collocations such as *Jewish American princess* and *Uncle Tom*.

derogative, there's the sense that she has engaged in a pointed departure from what would be the default term to use in that context to express the intended propositional meaning. In the terminology of linguistics, slurs are marked. And as we'll see, what determines which word is the default isn't its meaning as such, but rather the social features of the context that dictate which linguistic conventions speakers are expected to conform to in that setting.

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 his knowledge of English, not in his 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 way standard dictionaries define items like these:

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 (the use of *ain't* 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).²² But these

²² People frequently say things like "*redskin* has a disparaging meaning," in the same way they might say "*bloviolate* has a jocular meaning," using "meaning" to refer simply to what one expects a dictionary to say about the word or what one has to know about the word in order to use it appropriately. And one might ask whether it isn't simply hair-splitting to ask whether

features can give rise to conversational implicatures. Thomas 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,” which is what makes the word 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 “Shit, 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.²³

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 are used conventionally—in the loose sense—when we want to color 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.²⁴ 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. 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.

One further example. Pointing at a photograph of myself at the age of six seated on pony in full Lone Ranger regalia, I say, “Here I am on my trusty steed.” You take my utterance as

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.

²³ The effect of *alas* could become conventionalized, of course, but not without a difference in the affect it conveys, in the same way the naturalization of a French word strips it of the implications that it had when we thought of it as foreign.

²⁴ 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.

gently self-mocking; *steed* is not a word we ordinarily use for such animals. On Frege's account, it differs from *horse* only in its tone or coloring, which make no contribution to truth-conditions. Horn (Horn, 2013) describes the word simply as conveying a positive evaluation of its referent, but of course it does much more than that: it suggests an animal that is strong, handsome, noble and valorous, among other things—the connotations are hard to spell out in full. But there's no reason to assume that any of this is part of the word's extra-denotative meaning or the result of a conventional implicature. *Steed* is just the word used for the horses of the heroes of chivalric romances and their modern reflexes, such as in dime novels and movie horse operas. That's really all one needs to know about the word to conjure up the mental image (*Vorstellung*) it evokes; further conventions are unnecessary. And when I use the word in a context in which the conventions of that genre would obviously be irrelevant I implicate that I'm speaking ironically. (Note that here as with the other cases of putative conventional implicature that I mentioned, there's no sense of tautology when one reinforces the imputed attributes explicitly, as in "His steed was a strong, noble animal.")

Ventriloquistic Implicatures

The maneuvers involved here belong to a family of conversational implicatures that arise out of the Maxim of Manner. Horn (Horn, 1984) and Levinson (Levinson, 2000) have reformulated the maxim and its consequences in somewhat different ways, but both in terms of markedness, and 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, 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 in 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 particular conversational maneuver as ventriloquism.²⁵ 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 register, 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 as it happens, that French

²⁵ One seventeenth-century word-list defined *ventriloquist* as "one that hath an evil spirit speaking in his belly," which is not far off as a description of the use of slurs. (OED)

scandale and English *scandal* are synonyms: when Frenchmen say *Quel scandale!* they express 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. This is the same ploy that has led English-speakers in the past to plunder the French lexicon for items like *risqué*, *voyeur*, *coquette* and *ménage à trois*, terms that permit us to talk about naughty things with a more urbane tolerance than our Anglo-Saxon attitudes typically countenance (which is why we’ve retained the orthographic or phonetic features that mark them as conspicuously alien, even though they’ve been used in English for centuries). Of course 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.

Properties of Ventriloquistic Implicatures

These implicatures have several properties which 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 unhappy 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 strongly 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, and that its obviousness is conversationally relevant. 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 apparent exceptions (see below), 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. When you refer to a woman in English conversation as a *femme fatale*, it’s not in defiance of a default expectation that you would refer to her as “an attractive and seductive woman who is likely to cause the downfall of anyone who becomes involved with her” or some other description (though over time, of course, the foreign phrase may itself be naturalized as the conventional English name for such things). 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. Failing that, the use of a foreign word may sound pretentious, particularly if it isn’t already familiar, but it won’t convey a marked attitude about the referent.

I should add, as I noted earlier, that words can sometimes give rise to these implicatures even when they do not correspond to a default convention, when they imply a common interest in distinguishing a category that the public declines to recognize as such—that is,

when the absence of a default convention reflects a common interest in *not* distinguishing such a category. 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 persons of color.²⁶

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 typically 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, usually on the basis of judgments about minimalist invented examples like "I used to think kikes were bad," which seems to admit no reading in which the speaker is not committed to the import of the slur. 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.) And it's not hard to find unexceptionable, naturally occurring sentences in which the attitudes implicit in a slur are not attributed to the speaker. The gay playwright Harvey Fierstein produced a crisp example in an interview on MSNBC: "Everybody loves to hate a homo." Here are a few others (I follow Horn (Horn, 2013) in using "γ" to indicate a Googled example):

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

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.

²⁶ *Squaw* is another example of a slur with no default equivalent. 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*. In fact it parallels the paradigm *Jew-Jewess-Jewling*, the latter term attested in nineteenth- and twentieth-century use.

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.

There is still a tendency to be explained here, if not a rule, but it has a straightforward pragmatic explanation. 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 you’re apparently mild and tolerant 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 by “Everybody loves to hate a homo” is that anti-gay sentiment is grounded in the homophobia that expresses itself in words like *homo*. But if the inference that the speaker’s attitude is noteworthy is unwarranted, 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.

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 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 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 prejudicials. Those follow naturally from conversational

principles taken together with the notion of a default convention, which is where I want to turn now.

Lexical Conventions and Their Provenances

The basic idea here is that 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" (my italics). 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." 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 possession 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." On this understanding, that is, to speak of the "conventional" meaning" of a word isn't simply another way of referring to its "literal meaning," as semanticists often find it convenient to do. (Cf (Recanati, 2004 p. 68): "... the literal meaning of a linguistic expression is its conventional meaning: the meaning it has in virtue of the conventions which are constitutive of the language.") Conventionality is a social notion, which imposes its own conditions on an account of language use; we can't test for it simply by appealing to such criteria as the nondefeasability of a sentence's entailments.

At a first pass, we can think of a lexical convention as a rule for using a word that a group of people conform 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.²⁷ Sometimes that's because the word denotes a category the members of the group have a 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

²⁷ I'm interested here only in lexical conventions. I assume, roughly following Lewis (D. K. Lewis, 1969) that a convention is an understanding among the members of a group that they will try to conform to a certain regularity in certain 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.

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 (D. Lewis, 1975) touches sketchily on internal linguistic heterogeneity, but not so as to affect the general point.) That picture implicitly assumes 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. Americans and Englishmen perceive no overriding common interest being able to talk to each other about vegetables, which why the former use *rutabaga* while the latter use *swede*, 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. A language, in reality, is “a sprawling mass of crisscrossing, overlapping conventions,” as Millikan (Millikan, 2005) puts it in another context. That description is apt but avoids as I am doing on the central question of how these sprawling masses of conventions assemble themselves into proper languages—where exactly does English come into this?

virtue of a more widespread acknowledgement of the interest it answers to, often accompanied a reinterpretation of that interest—in which case the meaning of the word may change, as well.

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," "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.²⁸ (Think of the discourse of modern corporate life, in which employees are expected to refer to their goals as missions and their interests as passions. 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,

²⁸ 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.

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 what Daniel Harris (Harris, 2013) calls an "affiliatory" speech act, 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 main 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 signaling one's affiliation with a group in which the target 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 himself 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 that corresponds to an independent social division between groups that have distinct linguistic conventions for referring to the category.

The determination of the default convention for referring to something normally depends on the features of the context—whether a teenager is talking to a friend or to a teacher, whether a philosopher is talking to her undergraduates or her colleagues, and so on. For the sorts of words we're interested in, though, it won't distort things too much to take the default convention as the one that generally governs reference in public discourse. Note however that such conventions are by no means always "neutral." What we think of as neutrality is really a socially negotiated default that is constantly reevaluated from one period or setting to the next. Even terms that have no alternative synonyms can be freighted with connotations, particularly when they involve categories that are notoriously sensitive to opinions that are so diverse and labile. In fact it's precisely the connotations that a word trails that lead people to choose it as a default, only to discard it or replace it when attitudes change, in the way *Negro* yielded as a

default to *black* and *African American*, and *Oriental* to *Asian*. Fifty years ago, *gay* was a positively valenced term used among a relatively small community as a substitute for the default term *homosexual*, a default term that was anything but “neutral.” Now the words’ positions are in a way reversed, with *gay* as the default and *homosexual* as its tendentious alternative, particularly as applied to cultural categories like marriage and lifestyle. Yet one wouldn’t want to argue that *gay* is “neutral” or 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 the broader American public discourse, that is, you can describe someone as *gay* without having to justify the term’s connotations, but also without any strong implication that you are personally signing on to them, whereas to speak of the homosexual community, say, commits you personally to the connotations that the term evokes. The default term is not necessarily one without evaluative connotations, but rather the one for whose connotations the speaker need assume the least personal responsibility, beyond tacitly acknowledging them as a basis for conversation.²⁹

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

²⁹ When views about an issue or 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 Solomonically splitting the difference.)

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 flattering about Englishmen while speaking English, after all, why would he make a point of using a word that signaled his affiliation with a group whose members stereotypically detest them?

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 an appraisive term like *nanny state* or *fat cat*, which semantically disparage their referents. Rather it's just the neutral descriptive name for free-market capitalism in the ideological discourse of people who hold that the capitalist system is an exceptionally 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 market capitalism." And it's why someone can assert that free enterprise is the fairest and most productive economic system without suggesting redundancy. 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 a good bet to believe in the unique truth of the faith.

From Description to Derogation

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*.³⁰ 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 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 certain classes in the ante-bellum South, where the 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 has a contemptuous attitude towards them—in effect, that the desire to convey a contemptuous attitude is just a condition on the felicitous utterance of the word. People typically describe the use of these words in such terms. May (May, 2005) says that *kike* means “Jewish and used to

³⁰ 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.

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 immediately 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 English-speakers of all varieties are susceptible to some strain of the endemic racism of modern society, but that doesn’t entail that they 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.³¹

³¹ A reviewer asks whether it might not be “sufficient for something to be part of a language that there is the relevant sort of convention among a suitable *subgroup* of the speakers.” Clearly conventions are subject to Putnam-like divisions of labor; the members of a community who discern a common interest in having a word for A may delegate responsibility to experts for deciding how exactly “A” should be used. But where people perceive no collective interest in coordinating reference to such-and-such a category, or more to the point, where people perceive that a convention among a subgroup serves a purpose that runs counter to their collective interests, they can’t be considered parties to it. Otherwise we would be in the position of having to say that everyone, including women, was a party to the convention that governed the use of sexist terms, and so on for other slurs.

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 saw, the provenance of a convention can correspond to the social extension of 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. In fact it follows from this analysis that prejudicials of this type are possible only when a socially distinctive subgroup or subdiscourse holds a self-consciously heterodox view of the denotation of a word. 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 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 *swag money!* to mean "Oh, joy!" They use it in settings in which that social identity is foregrounded, for whatever reason, typically in conversation with others who share their views. We may think of slurs as being paradigmatically terms of abuse, but it isn't in second-person reference that their characteristic associations are formed for their speakers, even though those are the uses that we nowadays look at when evaluating the attitude that they actually convey.³²

To be sure, *nigger* is a special case, an arch-slur with a long and dense history. Given the breadth of its provenance, *nigger* is 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 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 *nigger* signifies in isolation.

³² Virtually all Americans know and understand the word *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 isn't easy to decide, since it's unclear how Grice understood her dislike for the expression. Was it because she considered the word *runt* 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 to have been a vulgar one, in which case she may have been?

Whiteness can be constructed in various specific ways, which generally emerge “in encounters or challenges from black Americans,” as Feagin, Vera and Batur (Feagin et al., 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—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.” Some people use the word to directly express hatred or contempt toward or about blacks, others to “bolster self-esteem for all in-groupers by highlighting the inferiority of an out-group and thus the relative superiority of the in-group,” as Greenberg, Kirkland and Pyszczynski (Greenberg, 1988) described the social use of slurs in an influential 1988 paper.

The neglect of this function of slurs obscures their capacity to give offense even to third-party listeners who aren’t actually targeted by the words. On the one hand, gestures of solidarity can be miscalculated, particularly when the listener doesn’t in fact share the speaker’s background or views. This is what most vexed many of the nineteenth-century critics of the use of *nigger*. 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). What rankled was not the speaker’s insult to the target so much as the effrontery of assuming that his addressees were of the same social cut as he. I suspect that that’s what’s really troubling Richard (Richard, 2008) when he explains his reluctance to say that slurs refer in a passage that illustrates the perils of excessive abstraction:

Imagine standing next to someone who uses S* as a slur. Perhaps you are in front of a building where targets of the slur live or work; the [T]he 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.

The passage illustrates the perils of excessive abstraction. Why should Richard feel that acknowledging that what the racist said was true would oblige him to sign on for all the connotations of the word the racist used? We’ve seen that a slur doesn’t semantically encode the stereotypes it’s associated with. If the building is in fact full of Ss, then why can’t we simply take the racist as having uttered what Gibbard (Gibbard, 2003) calls “a truth objectionably couched.” In fact despite the schematic presentation of the example, Richard’s conclusions rely implicitly on some very specific assumptions about what is going on. We

assume, for one thing, that the word “the racist” used was something like *nigger* or *spic*, and not, say, *limey*—in the latter case, after all, we’re unlikely to be so indignant as to find the content of the speaker’s remark as literally unthinkable. For that matter, what if the word in question were a political slur such as *libtard* or *Repuglican*, or if the speaker were merely a Republican partisan referring to members of “the Democrat party”? This seems to be a story only about certain strong racial slurs. But if so, what makes them semantically different from other derogatives? That isn’t all that’s unspoken here. We assume that neither we nor the speaker are members of the group that is targeted by S*, or relevance would have obliged Richard to mention the fact, and that the remark racist’s (a stranger, presumably) is addressed to us rather than simply overheard. If we were to overhear someone saying, “I shot that nigger,” after all, would we feel we had to throw up our hands and declare that the remark had no truth-value? Communication hardly requires that the hearers agree with the speaker on the evaluations implicit in the terms he uses to describe the world; if this particular situation inclines us to reject what the racist said, it’s not so much because his utterance obliges us to think of Ss as he does, but because he seems to assume that we already do—that he’s using the term in a gesture of solidarity. In that case we’re entitled to be indignant at his presumption in classing us with him among “the lowest of the vulgar,” albeit in more modern dress.

Conversely, we might take umbrage at the racist’s remark because he patently doesn’t believe we think of Ss as he does, in which case he might also be using the word confrontationally. People very often use slurs with the deliberate intent of offending nontargeted listeners, sometimes to affirm the social identity that’s encoded in the label “politically incorrect”—the utterance becomes a demonstration of one’s candor and authenticity and of one’s refusal to kowtow to the elitist hypocrites who self-righteously condemn any language that might offend some group. The point here is to troll for liberal indignation, whether disapproving auditors are actually present, as when the word is used in Twitter posts, or are merely imagined listeners-on. The solidarity evoked 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.

The Sting of Slurs

Up to here I’ve been emphasizing the role of slurs as the expressions of social identity rather than as instruments aimed at injuring, intimidating, or provoking their targets. There’s a certain rationale for this emphasis, and not just as a corrective to the almost exclusive focus on the abusive function of the words in most of the literature. If we consider only the actual use of the words, they’re not that often used for direct abuse. True, the words may surface in face-to-

face encounters in schoolyards or street confrontations, not to mention in the anonymous threats or assaults posted on Twitter or the Internet. But it's a fair bet that most of the people who use *nigger* restrict its use to what Erving Goffman (Goffman, 1999 (1959)) called "backstage" settings and have rarely if ever addressed the word to a black person. Indeed, a group may have a slur for a group of people that its members have no expectation of ever encountering. Recent events remind us that anti-Semitic slurs still flourish in regions of Europe from which their targets were effectively eradicated seventy years ago.

Yet even so, to give priority to the self-identifying uses of slurs over their abusive use is as much of a distortion as to focus exclusively on the latter. The two functions are inseparably linked. On the one hand, even if a word is never actually used as a term of abuse, its imagined effect on its target will color the speaker's own self-perception. On the other, the impact of a slur on its target depends among other things on how it suggests that the speaker is representing himself, which is why the alternate words for a group vary in tonality and intensity. That point was illustrated in a famous sketch in the opening season of Saturday Night Live (Henry, 2013). Chevy Chase is a job interviewer who asks a character 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, as 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!

Mr. Wilson: Honky!

Interviewer: Spade!

Mr. Wilson: Honky Honky!

Interviewer: Nigger!

Mr. Wilson: *Dead* honky!

Why do these words for blacks (and for whites) land with such disparate impact? There has been almost nothing said about this in literature, as I noted; writers are concerned exclusively with accounting for the variation in the intensity of slurs for different groups—why is *nigger* stronger than *mick*, for example? Intuitively, that's not a mystery: other things being equal, the relative strength of a slur for group A and a slur for group B is going to correlate with the degree of racism or discrimination that each group is perceived as facing. The problem arises when people try to accommodate that observation in their accounts of the

meanings of the words. On all versions of semanticism, the impact of a slur should be a consequence of what a speaker says or expresses about the target by using it. Hom (Hom, 2008) puts this in representationalist terms:

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.

Defending a multi-component expressivist account, Jeshion explains the offensiveness of “weapon” (i.e., derogatory as opposed to appropriated) uses of slurs as follows:

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. In this way, slurs, as a class, conventionally function to dehumanize. (Jeshion, 2013a)

The problem that arises for both these approaches, then, and indeed for any approach that assigns the word’s evaluative import to its semantics, is that the speaker’s attitudes or beliefs about the target don’t necessarily determine how offensive his utterance of the word is. A slur is offensive even when the speaker doesn’t harbor any animus against its target—think of 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. And *nigger* is more offensive than *frog* even in the mouth of someone who is well disposed toward blacks but despises the French. To account for this, Hom introduces a principle of “derogative autonomy,” which he puts as “The derogatory force for any epithet is independent of the attitudes of any of its particular speakers.”

Now the difficulty here is in part an artifact of the theories: if you hold that the conventional meaning of a slur commits its utterer to certain opinions or attitudes about its target, then you have to explain why the force of the slur doesn’t begin and end with what the speaker communicates about his attitudes. In effect, that means that proponents of these theories have to find a way of augmenting the utterance with external material, so that the history and circumstances of a group can trump the speaker’s attitude toward its members. Hom tries to achieve this by appealing to what he calls “combinatorial externalism,” which he models on Putnam’s framework. On his view, the predication made by a slur includes both the stereotype of the target and its consequences (“ought to be treated as such-and-such because of being “such-and-such”), as determined by the institutions of racism:

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.

Hom doesn't give any evidence for his claims about how the import of a slur is externally determined or suggest what facts might falsify it—he just calls it “plausible.” I've already alluded to several reasons why it isn't. “Racist institutions” may be indirectly responsible for many of the attitudes that are reflected in anti-Chinese slurs. But they aren't candidates for playing a direct causal role in the words' use. In language, a causal account of meaning or use can only be mediated by a chain of utterances, whether the practice involves the use of *gold*, Aristotle, or *chink*. And in fact the implications of using one or another slur, even for the same group, vary according to the word's specific provenance and history, not the status of the group itself, which is why *chink* and *Chinaman* and *spade* and *nigger* differ in both tone and amplitude.

More generally, it's a mistake to try to assimilate slurs to the kinds of cases that Putnam and others have talked about under the heading of the division of linguistic labor. The idea seems to be that people can use *chink* in the way they use *arthritis* or *annuity*, say—it denotes whatever authority has determined it denotes, or connotes what authority has determined it connotes, even if both the speaker and listener are unaware of its meaning. But while that may explain the use of slurs by children, say, an adult who describes someone as a nigger isn't about to add “whatever that means.” And when we speak of an utterance's “explosive force” we're talking about its immediate effect in the context, which is not something that can be kindled by stereotypes of which the participants are unaware. For that matter—and this is the fundamental problem with this picture—even when the speaker does knowingly predicate all those terrible things of the target with its utterance, it's not clear why it should necessarily be “explosive” or even disturbing. The crucial cases here aren't the ones where the speaker's beliefs or intentions don't coincide with what we take to be the force or import of the slur, but the ones where they do. The force of the slur almost invariably exceeds any injury that an individual could inflict simply by manifesting his attitudes about the target, however malignant they are. Why should I care about the beliefs or attitudes of some pseudonymous bozo who rails about kikes in an incoherent Twitter post—why would it matter to me or to anyone what *he* thinks or feels about Jews? Yet neither his insignificance nor my indifference is sufficient to palliate the offensiveness of the usage.

This points us toward saying that the offensiveness lies in the word itself, independent of anything the speaker is doing with it. One way of explaining this, as proposed by Anderson and Lepore, is to say that the word is phonetically toxic in the way an obscenity is, to that merely to speak it is to violate a taboo. I want to set this view aside for now; in the following section I'll show that while toxicity is a real phenomenon, it has both a narrow and local range and doesn't explain the derogatory power even of those words that it applies to. An alternative is to look to the associations the word evokes. Jeshion (Jeshion, 2013a) rejects, I think correctly, the idea that such associations or background could work their way into the conventional meaning of the term. Rather, she suggests that the intensity of a slur is a perlocutionary effect brought about when the word triggers the "socially existing stereotype of the group that the slurring term references":

Such circumstances will be frequent, for hearing someone expressing his contempt with a slurring term frequently activates stereotypes in hearers. Since stereotypes of different groups are offensive in different degrees, the strength of offensiveness to slurs' targets will vary with the slur...

Moreover,

An utterance of "Nigger" will typically cause considerably worse psychological and social damage than an utterance of "honkey" in part because the former occurs against the background of current widespread racism, history of slavery, and historical civil rights struggles for African-Americans, and nothing comparable for Caucasians.

But this account, too, can't explain the differences among slurs for the same group. In fact Jeshion notes that the same effect should obtain when someone says *black* in a contemptuous tone, the idea being that to verbally express a racist attitude is to evoke its history and prevalence.³³ But the utterances of "that nigger" and "that *black* girl"—or even, for that matter,

³³ Saka (Saka, 2007) makes a similar point, suggesting that the very existence of the word suggests that the attitudes it expresses must be widespread:

...in order to believe that a pejorative applies to someone, one must have not only contempt for a certain class but also access to conventionally established pejorative terminology; 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...

Now as we saw, the conventions for using words like these aren't defined over society as a whole but only over certain subgroups, some more prominent than others. The fact there are

“that *fucking black* girl”—are going to land very differently, even if they all express race-based contempt and bring to mind the same historical events and attitudes. There’s something extra that’s contributed by the word *nigger* itself.

That something extra, I have suggested, is drawn from the attitudes about the target that are associated with the group who have constituted the word’s historical provenance. But that alone doesn’t give a slurring utterance of the word its impact, which follows from the speaker’s self-affiliation with that group and its attitudes. 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 presumably does share the views typical of the native provenance of the word. By identifying 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 turns 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 *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 a Ku Klux Klan hood. As Judith Butler puts it, “The speaker who utters the racial slur is... making linguistic community with a history of speakers” (Butler, 2013).³⁴ Each slur for blacks brings a different provenance and different

slurs or derogatives for just about every racial, ethnic and religious group doesn’t entail that the attitudes they express “prevail in society at large.” But Saka is right to connect the effect of the slur with the social background it evokes.

³⁴ 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

practices to mind. If *nigger* evokes the vitriolic contempt of a George Wallace, *spade* evokes the condescension of Norman Mailer's claim to spiritual kinship with urban black culture—both of them racial sensibilities that were characteristic of mid-twentieth-century America, but in very different settings. 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 reaction that *nigger* would have evoked) (Dove, 1985).

This account explains why we don't discern any derogation when a slur is used by someone who is ignorant of its marked status. That can happen because the speaker is a child or a nonnative, 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, true, particularly if the slur is one of the handful that have become phonetically toxic. But so long as there's a plausible explanation for the speaker's 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."

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 Indians, 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

accumulates the force of authority through the repetition or citation of a prior and authoritative set of practices." I wouldn't describe these words as performatives or citations in the narrowly semantic sense of the terms, but Butler's treatment captures the insight that the use of a slur pointedly signals the speaker's self-affiliation with the speech-community that owns the word and that it is through that act, rather than in the content the speaker intends to convey, that it achieves its effect.

mythologies at the individual level” (Feagin et al., 2000)). But those fictions aren’t exculpatory. Here again, it’s the affiliatory intention that is morally decisive.³⁵

“Appropriation” 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 affiliatory intentions. The inferences may work differently when the speaker himself is a member of the targeted group. 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. When gays took to using *faggot* in arch self-reference, it was to evoke and ridicule the homophobes who used it in earnest. (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.)

Since the derogatory import is unchanged in first-stage (ironic or defiant) appropriation, there’s nothing in this phenomenon that militates for one or another theory of their meanings. On the account of prejudicial slurs that I’m giving here, the pragmatic inferences that give rise to the derogatory import are unchanged, except that we don’t take the speaker’s affiliatory claim in earnest. But the facts would be consistent with a semanticist account, as well, and in fact appropriation is equally possible where a term semantically incorporates its negative evaluation, as with appraisive terms like *slut* (as in the “slut walks” aimed at calling attention to rape culture). It’s only at the second stage of appropriation, which the majority of slurs never reach, that the word really ceases to be a slur and becomes instead

³⁵ That is, slurs are not “expressives”—words that, as Potts and Roeper (Potts & Roeper, 2006) put it, (semantically) “indicate that [the speaker] is in a heightened emotional state.” The impact of a slur doesn’t require any semantic trigger, and whether its user is in an emotional state (say of intense detestation) is simply a conversational inference from her self-affiliation with the racists or bigots who own the word.

the content of a new convention, defined over a new social provenance and no longer parasitic on its derogatory use. Gays who use *queer* nowadays are not satirizing the homophobes who coined the term, and a description like Queer Studies has no ironic implications; rather it's the default term for the subject in certain contexts. In those contexts, straights can now use *queer* without with any suggestion of derogation. (See, e.g., (Brotsema, 2004), (Zwicky, 1997).) So it's simply a mistake to think that the facts of reclamation could be enlisted to argue for one or another approach to the linguistic analysis of these words. We should give speakers more credit; whatever and however an offensive term means, they can find a way to adapt it to their purposes.

Toxic Words

The dominant operation in the aesthetics of language is displacement, as words acquire distinctive feeling-tones from their setting and use. *Shit!* is dirty because shit is dirty, in more-or-less the same sense of the word. The taint of the reference attaches materially to the syllable itself, even when the word is used in a figurative way or when its form is embedded in another word. This is the principle that small children have already mastered when they take a salacious pleasure in saying “shamPOO,” and one reinforced as we learn the synonyms and circumlocutions that allow us to talk about shit without calling it by its true name.³⁶

In recent decades a few slurs, such as *nigger*, have become susceptible to a variety of this effect, though they inherit their taint from their contexts of use rather than their referents. Leaving aside their reclaimed uses—and perhaps not even there—many people find these items literally unspeakable. Simply to pronounce them is to activate them, and depending on the context, they aren't necessarily detoxified by placing them in quotation marks or when used in indirect speech. In that way, they resemble strong vulgarities—they call to mind the universal solvent sought by medieval alchemists, which no container could hold. Toxicity, that is, is a property that's attached to the act of pronouncing a certain phonetic shape, rather than to the act of using a word, which is why here, too, people can be disconcerted when all or part of the word appears as a segment of other words, as in *niggardly* or even *denigrate*.³⁷

³⁶ *Feces* is not dirty, of course; like other such words, it belongs to the sublanguage of science and is used by speakers who want to identify with that community in order to convey a clinical point of view. In our capacity as ordinary speakers of English, however, we have no nonvulgar term for the stuff that is not a euphemism or circumlocution. I should add, however, that there is an element of conventionality in the strength and use of vulgarisms: when an Italian wants to express the emotions we signal with shit!, he uses *cazzo!* (prick).

³⁷ During the 2008 election, Senator Barack Obama was criticized by some when he said that

Anderson and Lepore (Anderson & Lepore, 2013) have appealed to toxicity as the driving principle in a comprehensive account of slurs. Arguing almost exclusively on the basis of observations about *nigger*, they claim that the use of slurs in indirect discourse is “often offensive,” and on that basis go on to argue that what makes slurs in general offensive is not their content but a blanket prohibition on their use: slurs are prohibited: “words not on account of any content they get across, but rather because of relevant edicts surrounding their prohibition.” Words may be prohibited for any of a number of reasons, though in general that determination is left to the people the word targets. In any event, once a word is prohibited, “then whoever violates its prohibition risks offending those who respect it.” As for why the sanctions apply even to uses of the word in quotative contexts, Anderson and Lepore say that “Prohibited words are usually prohibited everywhere they occur,” though they provide no examples or explanations to support that claim.

Now, I’m sympathetic to Anderson and Lepore’s rejection of content-based accounts of the words, and they have done a service in drawing attention to the phenomenon of toxicity. Nonetheless, their account is a textbook illustration of the dangers of the presentism and the narrow focus that dog a great part of this literature. When one spreads the net even a bit wider, it becomes clear that toxification is a restricted and recent phenomenon that doesn’t even explain the effects of the words it applies to.

For one thing, only a handful of slurs are genuinely toxic. People are rarely distressed at the mere mention of *redskin*, *wop*, *frog*, *greaser*, *kraut*, *spade*, *Jap*, *Polack*, *wetback*, *cracker*, or *redneck*, but the words are offensive all the same; if people disapprove of their use, it’s purely in virtue of the insult they may give. For that matter, nobody has qualms about merely mentioning other slurs for blacks, such as *coon* or *spade*. There are a few other words—*kike* and *spic*, and in some regions *kaffir*—which some find disturbing simply as phonetic forms, but the reaction to those words is chiefly a recent extension of the toxification of *nigger*.³⁸

his former pastor Jeremiah Wright, held “views that denigrate both the greatness and the goodness of our nation.” As one said, “What does [*denigrate*] mean, literally? To blacken. The implication here is... that anything white is pure and virtuous and anything black is dangerous, corrupt and evil.” But one suspects that the objection has as much to do with the presence of the syllable *-nig* as with the word’s etymology; people who condemn *denigrate* on these grounds seem to have no objection to *atrocious*, which is ultimately from Gk *ατερ*, “black.”

³⁸ One can get a rough sense of how toxic a slur is by looking to see how often people use asterisks or similar characters in writing it, though people sometimes make a point of using

On Anderson and Lepore's account, "once relevant individuals declare a word a slur, it becomes one," using *slur* in a general, ahistorical sense to mean derogatives. But historically, most of the derogative words we would now describe as slurs have never been the subjects of any broad prohibitions. Even when those who used the words were aware that their targets objected to them, that was a matter of indifference to them. When Merriam-Webster's *Third International* appeared in 1961, it labeled terms like *fag*, *queer*, and *fairy* simply as slang. That doesn't mean that the editors didn't realize that those terms were derogatory—of course they did—but only that, like most other straight or closeted Americans of the period, they didn't see anything particularly wrong in disparaging homosexuals.³⁹ In many cases, in fact, the targets of the words haven't voiced any objections to the words, or at least not so as to be heard. Whites have been disparaging American Indians as redskins for more than 150 years, but until well into the twentieth century, not even Indians themselves voiced any public objections to the term, and a large proportion of them were probably unaware of its implications.⁴⁰ It's not as if *redskin* didn't become a slur until it was widely accepted that one shouldn't say the word. Even now, as we saw, there are many people who use *redskin* while denying that it is derogative, but their opinions are not decisive in the matter. (It goes without saying that foreigners or speakers of other languages are not in a position to object to slurs directed at them.)

asterisks or similar devices to write derogatory words that aren't generally regarded as toxic. The National Congress of American Indians spells the name of the Washington NFL team as *r*dk*ns* in order to stress its status as a slur. But public figures, courts and the broadcast media are not circumspect saying the word, as they are with genuinely toxic items such as *nigger* and *kike*.

³⁹ As the lexicographer Sidney Landau observes, lexicographers make a point of including warning labels on ethnic terms only when direct pressure is brought to bear on them.

[The lexicographer] is usually under no pressure to omit. . . offensive terms like *white trash*, *hillbilly* or *redneck*; *queer* or *fag*; *cretin* or *retard* (as terms of abuse). These epithets are not addressed to members of groups that can exert pressure on state commissioners of education; hence they are unimportant and considered to offend no one. Most are not even labeled by dictionaries as offensive. The question that arises is: To whom are they not offensive?" (Landau, 1984)

⁴⁰ *Red-skin* entered English, via French, as the translation of an Algonquian term in the early nineteenth century, but by mid-century it was being used by whites with no awareness of its origin, though groups of Indians continued to use the equivalent term in their own languages. (When nineteenth-century writers depict an Indians referring to himself, it is invariably as *red man*, not *redskin*.) There's no evidence of Indian objections to the English term until well into the twentieth century, but that means very little either way. See (Goddard, 2005)

As a matter of historical fact, when “prohibitions” on a derogative word have emerged—or more specifically, when the taboo on producing a derogative has been extended to its phonetic or orthographic shape—it is always in consequence of the disparaging implications of its use. Even when such taboos arise, moreover, their effects are distinct from the intrinsic derogative force of the word. The power of *nigger* to engender unease even in quotational contexts isn’t at all the same as the offense it generates when it’s used as a derogation. You may be discomfited to hear someone say “Michael Richards said ‘nigger’ in his night-club act,” but the remark isn’t intrinsically racist in the way that Richards’ own “He’s a nigger” was. To be sure, people occasionally take advantage of the putative dispensation for using these words in quotative contexts to repeat them conspicuously, as the right-wing provocateur Matt Drudge did in a blog item linking to a review of Quentin Tarantino’s *Django Unchained* that he headed “‘N*GGER. N*GGER. N*GGER. N*GGER. N*GGER. N*GGER.’” In comments and tweets, several people suggested that that was the headline Drudge had been dying to use throughout his coverage of the 2012 campaign, though in this instance the purpose was simply to arouse indignation under cover of citation. But as justifiably indignant as the responses to the headline were, they weren’t remotely comparable to the reactions Drudge would have gotten if he had used a photo of Obama rather than one of Tarantino. And while many people are circumspect about pronouncing the word in any context, most acknowledge that there is a difference in culpability between using the word and merely mentioning it.⁴¹

The Problem with Silentism

In short, the phonetic toxification of slurs has no explanatory role to play in a general theory of derogative words. It’s a localized, recent and unprecedented phenomenon that emerged in concert with the shifts in cultural attitudes that I mentioned at the outset, which among other things gave us the doctrine of linguistic self-determination and the new meanings of words like *racism* and *slur* itself. But that in turn raises another question: if the phenomenon is so exceptional, why did it arise when and where it did, and what does that say about contemporary racial attitudes? That question is important because, like many of the linguists

⁴¹ The journalism critic and blogger Jim Romanesko (Romanesko, 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.” But TV news is much more skittish about using the word, even in quotative contexts, than the print media are.

and philosophers who have written on derogatives, Anderson and Lepore aren't simply arguing for an explanatory principle but are defending a general social practice; in this case, of silentism: "we insist upon silentism as policy." And while that statement is couched as a general ethical judgment, it's actually saturated in unspoken cultural assumptions, as are many of the other ethical claims about slurs that writers advance on what they take to be general semantic grounds. But when one unpacks those assumptions and looks at the way silentism figures in contemporary racial ideology and practice, it turns out to be more problematic than people realize. I won't develop the case at length, but it's worth raising as a cautionary point.

A bit of history: As I noted, the toxification of "the N-word" is a relatively recent phenomenon. It's true that many genteel people were reticent about using the word long before that euphemism appeared, but that was a reaction to its perceived vulgarity, and didn't extend to a prohibition on mentioning or pronouncing it.⁴² The stigmatization of the form itself among whites really began in liberal circles the 1930's or so, in part as a response to longstanding black objections. As Langston Hughes (Hughes, 1993) wrote in 1940:

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

It was only at this point that people began to make a systematic effort to eliminate *nigger* from the language—the first stirrings of the doctrine of linguistic self-determination, which held that the groups targeted by a word could declare it a slur—though always subject to majority ratification.⁴³ In response to objections by black cast members, David Selznick expunged the

⁴² A contributor to the *Century Magazine* wrote in 1894 that "An American feels something vulgar in the word 'nigger.' A 'half-cut' [semi-genteel] American, though he might use it in speech, would hardly print it." That observation stands in striking opposition to the contemporary idea that the word can be printed but not spoken.

⁴³ We shouldn't lose sight of the majority's role in acceding to the views of the targeted group. In 1969 a Jewish businessman initiated a campaign to persuade the *Oxford English Dictionary* to alter or delete its entry for the verb *Jew* as "to drive a hard bargain; to haggle." The editor first refused saying that "it is the duty of lexicographers to record actual usage... not to express moral approval or disapproval of usage." Ultimately, the editors did add a usage note, "now considered offensive," where the "now" makes it clear that it is the opinion of Gentiles that matters, not of the Jews for whom the word has always been offensive (one would conclude from this entry that there was nothing offensive in saying "He Jewed me down" in 1940).

word from the 1939 film version of *Gone with the Wind* (it occurred almost 100 times in the book) (Asim, 2007). The purge was a more extensive linguistic undertaking than it would have been for any other slur, since *nigger* had an unparalleled purchase in the American vocabulary. It occurred in idioms (“work like a nigger,” “nigger in the woodpile”), in children’s rhymes (“ten little niggers,” “catch a nigger by the toe”) and in the names of colors, fish, animals, sweets, and fireworks, among many other things (cf. *nigger brown*, *niggerfish*, *niggertoe*, *nigger chaser*). In 1967, the US Board on Geographic Names changed *Nigger* to *Negro* in 167 place names (a project that raised later problems when *Negro* itself became problematic). The purge therefore called for a kind of global search and replace, which required focusing on the word as a phonetic and orthographic object, which inevitably contributed to its fetishization. But it wasn’t until the final decades of the twentieth century that the prohibition was widely extended to the mention of the word in quotational contexts. That was when people began to refer to *nigger* with the same kind of initialized euphemism used for *shit* and *fuck* and to describe it with terms like “obscenity” and “curse word,” and when people began to get in trouble for saying things like *niggardly*.

To most, the identification of strong slurs with vulgarities is more than just an analogy. John McWhorter writes that “The N-word and the one beginning with C that refers to a female body part are the main curses today. These are truly taboo, in the sense an anthropologist studying us would recognize.” (McWhorter, 2012) And Anderson and Lepore cite Joel Feinberg (Feinberg, 1985) on the inhibiting force that the taboos on obscene words exercise, “which give them their inherent capacity to offend and shock.” But toxic slurs and vulgarities are different in fundamental ways. The word *fuck* is officially proscribed, but there are certain contexts in which its use is permitted or even expected. Not that the taboo on its use is situational. Rather it’s unconditional, which is what allows us to make a point by transgressing it, and thus demonstrate that our emotions have gotten the better of us. As Erving Goffman observed, swearing is “a form of behavior whose very meaning is that it is something blurted out, something that has escaped control.” (Goffman, 1978). Feinberg himself makes a similar point:

one might even go so far as to say that shocking others is what these words are *for*, how they are understood to function in a language. They are able to do this job because of word-taboos that have a powerful inhibiting force, but not so powerful that they are never defied. By virtue of an almost paradoxical tension between powerful taboo and universal readiness to disobey, the words acquire their strong expressive power.

But this is not what is going on with *nigger*. If most people regard the mere mention of the slur as taboo in many situations, it isn't in order enable racists to use it to shock or induce horror. Unlike the taboo on *fuck*, it doesn't come with an implicit wink. In fact it's notable that the mention of *nigger* is far more taboo in speech than in writing. The word has almost disappeared from broadcasts, but publications like the *Washington Post* and the *New York Times* continue to print it in the course of quoting someone (in fact the word that really bothers the *Post*'s style guru is the euphemism "N-word," which he calls "trivializing and childish"). The print media are much more circumspect about repeating genuine vulgarities, like the "major-league asshole" remark that George W. Bush inadvertently produced over a live mic at the 2000 campaign event, which few newspapers and no broadcast media reproduced in full.⁴⁴ That is, the very settings in which an apparent excess of emotion may extenuate the use a vulgarity are those in which the mention of a slur is most least excusable.

But the identification of slurs with obscenities can have the effect of effacing these distinctions, with some unwelcome consequences. It gives some people license to treat the use of *nigger* as a kind of naughtiness equivalent to saying *fuck*—I think of national uproar over the fraternity members at Oklahoma University who were captured on a cell phone during a bus ride singing "there will never be a *nigger* in SAE" and making references to lynching, and who seemed genuinely nonplussed at the charge that they were racists. And this formulation of silentism effaces the distinction between slurring and reclaimed uses of the word. That's one reason why it is appealing many conservatives, who can then evenhandedly blame both white racists and black rappers for using *nigger*, with some even suggesting that the latter bear the responsibility for spreading it. (In reaction to the Oklahoma incident, the conservative TV host Joe Scarborough said: "The kids that are buying hip hop or gangster rap, it's a white audience, and they hear this over and over again. So do they hear this at home? Well, chances are good, no, they heard a lot of this from guys like this who are now acting shocked." (Bump, 2015))⁴⁵ In short, this variety of silentism fits neatly into an established pattern of enlisting symbolic anti-racism in the service of an implicitly racist ideology, which goes back to the moment at which "racism" assumed its place as a universal execration in American life. One can argue

⁴⁴ Nexis searches show that since 1994, occurrences of *nigger* have declined about 50 percent in major newspapers, against more than 90 percent in broadcast news programs. In 2012, it was spoken only four times on the broadcast and cable TV news networks, in each instance by blacks recalling the insults they endured in their childhoods.

⁴⁵ Conversely, the Washington Redskins argue that their name is legitimated by the use of *redskin* as a team name by predominantly Indian high schools: if it is acceptable in one context, the argument goes, it is acceptable in all of them.

over whether these points discredit silentism as such or merely the rhetoric that surrounds it. One way or the other, it makes the point that these issues have to be joined in their full cultural setting. There is nothing we can say about slurs in a purely linguistic or philosophical capacity alone that will tell us how to think about them.

Appendix: A Note on Prejudicials and Appraisives (Thick Terms)

One reason why it's easy to lose sight of the distinction between appraisive terms and prejudicials is that words sometimes migrate from one class to the other. *Bitch* has long been a pejorative for a woman with certain unpleasant characteristics—that is, as appraisive term—but in parts of hip hop culture it has acquired another use as a derogative term for women in general; i.e., as a prejudicial. When Lil Abner says, “I went out with a lot of bitches,” his utterance is ambiguous: he might mean either that he dated a lot of nasty or unpleasant women, or just that he dated a lot of women. In the first instance you can contest his utterance by rejecting either component; you can say either “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 appraisive term *bitch* may still be resonating in the background when it’s used as slur, but it isn’t part of what one asserts with the word. In the same way, when *bitch* is used as a derogative the speaker doesn’t necessarily convey a negative attitude about the particular person it refers to, no more than “My neighbor is a chink” does. The derogation may fall only on the 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 pejorative.

The shift can go the other way, as well. A derogative that conveys a negative attitude towards all members of G can be used as a pejorative that applies just to the members of G who actually have the negative traits associated with the group. This is the process that people exploit when they make semantic distinctions between slurs and their default equivalents, usually factitiously. A character in a novel says, “He’s a Christian but not what you’d call a goy.” A headline in a public relations newswire reads “DC's PR Luminaries Explain Why 'I'm Not a Flack,’” in an effort to dispel the unprincipled stereotypes of public relations that the alternate term *flack* suggests. Chris Rock used to do a comedy routine contrasting Negroes and niggers, and others have contrasted those terms in a more repugnant way.⁴⁶

⁴⁶ Randall Kennedy (Kennedy, 2002) relates the following story:

When one encounters a sentence or phrase of the form “Some Ds are Ss,” “Not all Ds are Ss,” “Ds who are Ss,” and the like, where D is a default term and S is a term that normally functions as a slur for the group denoted by D, S is invariably being used to denote the subgroup of Ds who have the negative properties typically associated with the group:

γ Yeah, well, some colored guys are niggers. It's a shame, but it's true. And some Jews are kikes, and some Dutchmen are goddamn fuckin' squareheads-not me, of course.

γ Feel free to get the fuck out. We go after Jews that are kikes, white trash, illegal occupier Mexicans, and blacks that are niggers.

γ Not all Jews are Kikes, some are decent people.

Note that in these cases the stereotypical traits that are only implied by the derogative term become part of the lexical meaning of the pejorative derived from it, and hence are subject to contestation, like the evaluative components of other appraisive words. Someone who says “X is a faggot,” using the word as a derogative for homosexual men in general, might convey his belief that such men are effeminate. But one can't contest his assertion by insisting that X is macho, the way one can if *faggot* is interpreted as a pejorative for flamboyant or cross-dressing homosexuals, as in the example above. Similarly, if an anti-Semite says “New York Jews are all kikes,” another anti-Semite might reply, “No, I've known some who were generous and square dealers.” Whereas when the first anti-Semite says “The editors are all kikes” with the intention simply of identifying the editors as Jewish, the second anti-Semite can't point to his acquaintance with some generous Jews to contest the remark.⁴⁷

The failure to distinguish derogatives from the pejoratives derived from them has led to various misapprehensions in the literature. For example, Hom (Hom, 2008) argues that derogatives are not synonymous with their neutral equivalents by claiming that one cannot truthfully report the utterance in (1) with (2):

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

⁴⁷ This importation of stereotypes into semantics is characteristic of the figurative or extended uses of words. When we describe a man as a gorilla, we invariably convey that he is strong or brutal, even if those properties are only stereotypically associated with the animals literally denoted by the word, and if that metaphorical usage becomes conventionalized, what was formerly part of a stereotype becomes part of the new literal meaning.

1. I am Chinese, and not a chink.
2. A said that he is Chinese and not Chinese.

Now (1) can be interpreted in two ways. It could express a metalinguistic negation, as in “I reject the word *chink*,” an interpretation made more plausible if *chink* has been recently uttered or is salient in the context (“You chinks do nothing but study all the time”). In that case the word *chink* is mentioned, not used, and hence can’t be replaced by a denotationally synonymous term. But there is another reading of (1) in which *chink* is used as derived pejorative that denotes a Chinese person who is obsequious, devious, and so forth, in which case it doesn’t apply to all Chinese (cf. “He’s a Christian but not a goy,” etc.). In that case, too, *chink* can’t be replaced by *Chinese*, but only because the pejorative *chink* is no longer being used as a slur for Chinese in general.⁴⁸

In the same vein, Hom argues that if one takes *Chinese* and *chink* to be denotationally synonymous, then “the racist claim ‘Chinese are chinks’ literally expresses the same proposition as ‘Chinese are Chinese,’ which is a necessary truth.” Croom (Croom, 2011) makes a similar claim in arguing that to assume the synonymy of slurs and their default equivalents would require one to accept that “racist claims such as ‘African Americans are niggers’ literally express analytic truths that are knowable a priori.” The assumption here is that sentences like “Chinese are chinks” are identity statements like “Mountain lions are cougars,” where a species has two or more popular names. But here again, the sentence “Chinese are chinks” has two readings, neither of which permits the substitution of the default term for the slur. It can make the metalinguistic claim that the slur and its default equivalent are co-extensive, in which case it doesn’t predicate anything of the Chinese as such. On this reading, that is, the sentence itself makes a racist claim only if we read it as a prescription (as in “You should call the Chinese chinks”) rather than as a neutral description of a racist linguistic practice. Or the sentence may ascribe to Chinese people in general the stereotypical features that racists ascribe to the entire class—that is, the sentence really means, “The Chinese are all devious, clannish, etc.”

⁴⁸ Of the 60 Google hits for “Chinese are chinks,” none makes a racist claim about the Chinese in general. Other than in citations of Hom’s own papers, all the examples in which there is enough content to make the intended meaning clear involve explicit or implicit mentions of the slur.

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