

*Slurring Words*¹

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Increasingly philosophers (and linguists) are turning their attention to slurs—a lexical category not much explored in the past. These are expressions that target groups on the basis of race ('nigger'), nationality ('kraut'), religion ('kike'), gender ('bitch'), sexual orientation ('fag'), immigrant status ('wetback') and sundry other demographics. Slurs of a racial and ethnic variety have become particularly important not only for the sake of theorizing about their linguistic distribution adequately but also for the implications their usage has on other well-worn areas of interest. In "Reference, Inference, and The Semantics of Pejoratives," Timothy Williamson discusses the merits of Inferentialism by looking at Dummett's treatment of the slur 'boche.' Mark Richard attempts to show that, contrary to a commitment to minimalism about truth, one is not conceptually confused in holding that slurring statements are not truth-apt discursive discourses, i.e. statements that are neither true nor false, but still represent the world to be a certain way. Others, like David Kaplan, argue that slurs force us to expand our very conception of meaning. Slurs also rub up against various other issues like descriptivism versus expressivism as well as the semantic/pragmatic divide (cf. Potts). Slurs' effects on these issues make it difficult to ignore them and still give an adequate theory of language. In this paper, we will be particularly interested in the potential slurs carry to offend.

Though xenophobes are not offended by slurs, others are—with some slurs more offensive than others.² Calling an Asian businessman 'suit' will not rouse the same reaction as calling him 'chink'. Even co-extensive slurs vary in intensity of contempt. Christopher Darden once branded 'nigger' the "filthiest, dirtiest, nastiest word in the English language" (Kennedy, p. 23); we doubt anyone reacts as such to 'negro,' yet it too has become a slur. How can words fluctuate both in their status as slurs and in their power to offend? Targeted members themselves are not always offended by confrontations with slurs, for example, so-called appropriated or reclaimed uses (the camaraderie use of 'nigger' among African-Americans and 'queer' among homosexuals). These various data focus our investigation around three questions:

Why are some confrontations with slurs offensive?

Why do some impact audiences more forcefully than others?

How do targeted members sometimes succeed in mollifying them?

The consensus answer to the first question is that slurs, *as a matter of convention*, carry negative attitudes towards targeted groups. Since we know so much about how words communicate content, a brief canvass and evaluation of available explanatory alternatives is appropriate; in particular, do slurs offend audiences because of what they *semantically express*, *presuppose*, *linguistically display* (but not *describe*), or *conventionally implicate*? Or are their effects determined by *negative tone*—i.e. the subjective images they summon? These strategies—whether semantic and not—are committed to the view that slurs (or their uses) get across offensive *content*; they disagree only over the mechanism of implementation.

Our overarching aim in this paper is to deflate all content-strategies: each, no matter how it is conceived, we will argue, is irrelevant to an understanding of how slurs function and why they offend. Our positive proposal, in brief, is that slurs are *prohibited* words *not* on account of any content they get across, but rather because of relevant edicts surrounding their prohibition. This raises more than a few pertinent questions we will address below, including how words become prohibited, what's the relationship between their prohibition and their offense potential, and why is it sometimes appropriate to flout such prohibitions?

1. Preliminaries

A relatively wide-spread (though not universal; see Williamson) assumption about slurs is that each has a neutral co-extensive partner.³ For “each such word, there is, or at least perfectly well could be, another that applies to the same person but whose uses do not convey these things” (Hornsby, p. 128).

In identifying an intended target, *we* would never re-use the slur—*we* would never assert “‘kike’ refers to kikes”—but instead one of its ‘neutral counter-parts’, perhaps, “‘kike’ is a slur that anti-Semites use to refer to Jewish people’. This datum excludes most derogatory or pejorative expressions from our purview here. Calling someone a ‘thief’ or a ‘prostitute’ can be offensive and even pejorative, but it is not slurring.

Slurs target *classes*; pejoratives can be more individualized. ‘nigger’ slurs a group; ‘moron’ does not—even though both are pejorative. The apparent presumption is that anyone who uses the N-word slurs all black people, but one who uses ‘moron’ needn’t be slurring every mentally disabled person.

2. Content

The distinction between slurs and their neutral counter-parts already selects for investigative purposes the question of whether these co-extensive terms are synonymous. Does ‘nigger’ mean something different from its neutral counter-part

‘African-American’ or the less intense ‘negro’? Usually, when two expressions agree in extension but differ in consequences they are said to differ in meaning. And indeed the consensus is that slurring sentences correspond to bad thoughts whereas neutral sentences do not.

Williamson notes, “xenophobes use sentences in which [a slur] occurs to express complete thoughts, however bad those thoughts are” (Williamson, p. 140). Boghossian says, “it would be highly implausible to deny that the word ‘boche’ [a slur for Germans] *expresses* a concept” (2003, pp. 242–43; our emphasis). The concept corresponding to ‘boche’ is distinct from that for ‘German’, since, Williamson claims, it’s possible to understand ‘boche’ without understanding ‘German’ (2007, p. 143). Richard concurs:

... Imagine standing next to someone who uses S as a slur ... the racist mutters *that building is full of Ss*. Many of us are going to resist allowing that what the racist said was true. After all, if we admit its truth, we must believe that it is true that the building is full of Ss. And if we think that, we think that the building is full of Ss. We think, that is, what and as the racist thinks (Richard, pp. 3–4).

Blackburn says of slurring sentences that a speaker knows what he is “being asked to think, and it is because [he] know[s] this that [he] find[s] the remark offensive” (Blackburn, p. 148). And, according to Brandom, “the problem with ‘Boche’ and ‘nigger’ is not that once we explicitly confront the material inferential commitment that gives them their content it turns out to be novel, but that it can then be seen to be indefensible and inappropriate” (Brandom, pp. 71–72).

In short: the message in these passages is that slurs identify targets *via* concepts with contents distinct from those expressed by their neutral counter-parts. Is (2) therefore derogatory in a way that (1) is not because the words ‘nigger’ and ‘African-American’ express different concepts?

- (1) John is an African-American.
- (2) John is a nigger.

Does (2) cast its aspersion because of what it conventionally predicates of its subject?

The literature reveals little about the contents of slurs other than that their uses derogate, demean, insult, belittle, disparage, or diminish.⁴ The generally reliable O.E.D, a catalogue of senses, says no more than that a slur is pejorative, derogatory, debasing, denigrating, disparaging, or that it belittles its target group. This information fails to distinguish ‘nigger’ from ‘spook.’ Still, it does permit us to cull that slurs *supplement* the meanings of their neutral counter-parts with something pejorative, derogatory, debasing, offensive, or disparaging about their extensions; this requires that ‘nigger’ and ‘African-American’ be co-extensive, with the former *predicating* more of its target than the latter. This information, however meager, suffices to isolate a flaw in trying to pin the offensiveness of slurring on its predicative content.

Two standard tests for determining whether terms agree in predicative content examine their behavior under *denial* and *negation*. Anyone who wants to disagree with what (3) ascribes to Binyamin can do so with a denial, say, by affirming (4).

- (3) Binyamin is a Jewish person.
- (4) No, he's not.

(4), in this context, denies that Binyamin is Jewish, which is what (3) predicates of its subject. If (5) is offensive because of what it predicates of Binyamin, shouldn't we be able to reject its offense by denying it with (4)?

- (5) Binyamin is a kike.

But a denial of (5) is no less inflammatory than (5) itself. This critical point about denial obviously extends to negation.

Anyone offended by (5) will also be (*modulo* the discussion below of meta-linguistic negation) be offended by its negation (6).

- (6) Binyamin is not a kike.

We conclude that however a slur offends it is not through what it predicates of its subject alone. Indeed, most informants contend that (6) denies exactly what (3) affirms, which implies that 'Jewish person' and 'kike' *agree* in predicative content!

Not all theorists agree that the negation of a slurring sentence is derogatory (e.g. Blackburn, p. 148; Dummett 2007, p. 527; Hornsby, p. 129, Horn, p. 31), invoking an alleged non-derogatory use of (7) in their favor.

- (7) There are no niggers.

Careful examination of this datum is supposed to establish it as a case of meta-linguistic negation (Horn, Ch. 6), as in (8).

- (8) John is not good; he's great.

(8), under a meta-linguistic reading, does not ascribe greatness while denying goodness. It registers that, for one reason or another, its speaker refuses to use 'good' for John. By analogy, should we conclude that what (9) (and by extension (7)) expresses is a meta-linguistic claim, namely, a refusal to apply the slur 'nigger' to anyone?

- (9) There are no niggers; there are only African-Americans.

Blackburn says of such sentences they are a way of "disowning the attitude"; Hornsby says they can be used to "convey that 'nigger' is not something one calls anyone" (Hornsby p. 129); and Dummett, that it's a way of "repudiating the use of the term" (Dummett 2007, p. 527).⁵ Properly construed, then, (7) means (10):

(10) The word ‘nigger’ applies to no one.

(Or, “The word ‘nigger’ shouldn’t be used in talking about African-Americans”.)

As a defense of the view that slurs and their neutral counter-parts differ in what they predicate this diagnosis is dubious. First, it doesn’t explain why *bona fide* denials of pejorative predications are offensive, as in (11).

(11) Tino is no nigger; he’s a spic.

Secondly, it’s not obvious (9) succeeds in withdrawing its slur (cf. Saka, p. 124). (12) doesn’t deny John is well-known, so, why assume (4) and (6) withhold their slurs?

(12) John is not well-known; he’s famous.

If the intent is to reject the use of slurs, (6) and (7) are not recommended.⁶ The risk of offense runs high. (That too requires an explanation, one we will proffer below.)

3. Slurs under Embeddings

A fascinating aspect of slurs tracks their behavior in indirect speech (and other ascriptions). Normally, utterances can be correctly indirectly reported disquotationally. A use of (13) can be correctly indirectly reported by (14) by merely disquoting (13):

(13) Jacques Chirac visited Norway.

(14) Aaron said that Jacques Chirac visited Norway.

The general principle is: *re-use expressions in reporting their first uses*. What better insurance for accuracy can someone have in reporting another than to use his words?

By parity, Eric’s offensive use of (15) should be correctly reportable with (16).

(15) A bitch ran for President of the United States in 2008.

(16) Eric said that a bitch ran for President of the United States in 2008.

But (16), as a report of Eric, does not automatically capture *his* offense, though, interestingly, it guarantees an offense by *whoever is reporting him*.⁷ It’s *compatible* with all that (16) reveals that, although whoever uses it slurs women with his use of ‘bitch’, Eric never would. That is, the truth of (16) is compatible with Eric having uttered (17).

(17) A woman ran for President of the United States in 2008.

Accordingly, employing slurs in indirect report complements is an ineffective means to capturing an original slur by whoever is being reported: *whatever offense the report commits is endorsed only by the reporter*. What's gone wrong? We expect our indirect reports of others to be *of others*, not of ourselves.

Schlenker (2003, p. 43) disagrees with our assessment, locating a reading in (18) under which what's being reported is John's offense.

- (18) I am not prejudiced against Caucasians. But John, who is, thinks/claims that you are the worst honky he knows.

We deny that (18) succeeds in attributing any particular slur to John; It certainly doesn't require John to have used the word 'honky'. We credit any appearance of a transfer of its slur from the reporter to John to a conversational implicature: an inclination to pin the offense of the indirect report in (18) on John is due to the *unlikelihood* someone would use (18) as a correct report of John's utterance of (19).

- (19) You are the worst of all the useless Caucasians I know.

(18) alone doesn't guarantee John slurred; it is compatible with his having uttered (19) and his reporter, a xenophobe, insisting on using 'honky'.

Even (20), with its explicit attribution of an offense, doesn't semantically require (but merely conversationally encourages us to infer) that John slurred. (20) is compatible with John having uttered (21), which a xenophobe might opt to report with (20).⁸

- (20) John rather offensively said that Jim is a spic.
(21) Jim is one of those inferior Latinos.

(21), though offensive in virtue of its content, doesn't *slur* Latinos.

This result about the limits of indirect reporting is significant: even if a slur does carry offensive content conventionally, we *cannot* capture it in reporting another's use of one!⁹ Does this mean the offense of others' slurring uses is ineluctable? Does it mean that though we can recognize their offenses, we cannot re-express them? That is a surprising result.

Along the same lines, note that slurring is *non-displaceable*: a current use of a slur cannot be employed to discuss a past or future use without incurring a current infraction (cf. Cruse, Ch.12). Someone who once used 'kike' in discussing Jewish people cannot use the slur to try to discuss prior offenses without incurring a current one, as in (22):

- (22) I used to think kikes were bad.

No reading of (22) conveys only a past offense.¹⁰ Its offense cannot be interpreted as within the scope of their tenses. Slurs are paradigms of non-displaceability.¹¹ The contribution of 'bitch' in (16) is attributable to its user, not to Eric.

(16) Eric said that a bitch ran for President of the United States in 2008.

The speaker, in uttering (16), affirms not only that Eric said a woman ran for President in 2008, but does so in such a manner that the speaker, then and there, offends women.

It is too hasty to conclude on the basis of these data that no content-based strategy can explain the offensive nature of slurring. After all, content can be communicated in conversational contexts not just through what gets expressed or said. We must consider the possibility that somehow or other the offense of a slurring sentence like (5) is communicated—as a matter of convention—or encoded alternatively. But before moving on to this suggestion, we want to register a vital caution.

In academic discussions and in the quiet of a study, it's easy to convince oneself (we confess on occasions we have) that particular uses of slurs are inoffensive. We couldn't have written this paper had we not. As a safeguard against such inurnment, we strongly urge you always to ask yourself how a targeted member, perhaps accidentally overhearing you, would react to your usage. You'll find, as we have, that much of what seems suitable is definitely not.

4. Presupposition

Is the offensive content of a slur presupposed? Do felicitous uses of (5), (6), or (23) presuppose potentially offensive content about Jewish people (Schlenker, 2007)?¹²

(5) Binyamin is a kike.

(6) Binyamin is not a kike.

(23) Is Binyamin a kike?

Were an anti-Semite causally to toss one of these sentences into a conversation, is he, in normal circumstances, presuming his audience will *go along* with him about Jewish people? If so, it would account for the troublesome behavior of slurs within the scope of negation and inside interrogatives (and modals and conditionals). It would also explain the silent treatment slurs receive, that is, why most of us refuse to ascribe truth-values to slurring sentences^{13, 14}—as if evaluating them straightforwardly automatically commits us to some presuppositional content we reject. Maybe this is why assertions of sentences like (5) and (6), and queries like (23), leave us feeling entrapped. The situation is even more pernicious; silence in the face of a slur runs the risk of endorsement.

Whatever its attractions, the thesis that slurs presuppose offensive content is vulnerable to a number of objections, the main one of which springs from the fact that, unlike with presupposition, the offense of a slur automatically projects to the *entire* sentence in which it occurs. But not *all* types of complex sentences invariably inherit presuppositions of their components. A conditional does not automatically inherit the presuppositions of its consequent: whereas (24) presupposes (25),

- (24) He has stopped beating his wife.
 (25) He once beat his wife,

the conditional ‘If he once beat his wife, he has stopped beating her’ does not. But, as both Williamson and Potts observe, “it is less clear that ‘If Germans are cruel, then he is a Boche’ fails to inherit” the offense of ‘Boche’ (Williamson, p. 30; cf. also Potts, Ch. 5).

Though we agree with them about the data, it fails to establish that the pernicious content of a slur is *not* encoded presuppositionally: by and large, the assertibility conditions on indicative conditionals require their antecedents to be possible. If, for example, the presuppositional content of the N-word includes that blacks are inferior on account of being black, then the conditional ‘If blacks are inferior on account of being black, then John is a nigger’ is assertible only if whoever asserts it is committed to its antecedent being possible—and *it’s offensive to presuppose the possibility of this antecedent*.¹⁵ Thus, the presuppositional account is not off the table yet.

A better argument against a presupposition account of slurs is that ‘say’ filters out the presuppositions of its complement clauses (Karttunen). (26) does *not* presuppose (25).

- (26) Frank said that John stopped beating his wife, but John has never beaten his wife.

Whoever utters (26) is not trying to get his audience to go along with the proposition that *John used to beat his wife*. But suppose ‘bitch’ presupposes the proposition *that women are inferior on account of being women*. Were its offensive content encoded presuppositionally, (27) should be inoffensive

- (27) Eric said that a bitch ran for President of the United States in 2008 But women are not offensive or inferior on account of being women.¹⁶

Any utterance of (27) risks offending its audience. The point is that slurs manifest a very strong projection behavior, which makes them awfully different from the presuppositions triggered by ‘stop’, ‘the’, ‘also’ and the others. The presuppositions that these expressions create *are* dischargeable in indirect reports (and elsewhere).

5. Tone

Given the failures thus far of content-based strategies, one might wonder whether there isn’t someplace else we should look? Frege distinguished content from *tone*—the former determines which concept a word expresses, while the latter corresponds only to ‘ideas’ (mental images) associated with a word; “such conversational suggestions make no difference to thought” (Frege 1918–19, p. 331). Unlike conventionalized content, tone is entirely subjective. Two words that disagree in tone can share content, and so, extension; anyone who understands both must “realize that the contributions they make to the truth of the sentences in which they occur are the

same” (Picardi, p. 509). Might individualized tones distinguish slurs from neutral counter-parts?

No one can deny ‘nigger’ *can* arouse certain subjective images and feelings in, and suggest other negative evaluations for, us that ‘African-American’ need not. Is this what accounts for the difference in offensive punch slurs carry and neutral counter-parts lack? It can’t be the whole story.

Consider a xenophobe who only has a slur for picking out a target group. He may harbor no negative opinions towards its members; he may even use this slur only when intending to compliment or to announce affection, as in (28)–(30); his audience may even take his uses as such, but still they are pertinently offensive.¹⁷

(28) Chinks are so much smarter than the rest of us.

(29) He played like a nigger. (Kennedy, p. 30)

(30) I love wops; they are my favorite people on earth.

And in the other direction, even if a speaker and his audience attach negative associations to neutral counter-parts like ‘African-American’ (we are sure most racists do!) this cannot establish its uses are offensive.

Tone, by definition, is supposed to function subjectively for speakers and audiences¹⁸ but the difference between ‘nigger’ and ‘African-American’ is *not*. (“A difference in tone need not, and often cannot, be spelled out by means of a specific description or by adverting to specific pieces of collateral information . . .” (Dummett 1973, Ch. 5).) To square this opposition, discussions of tone and slurs tend to sink into treatments of subjective associations as *shared*. However, shared associations are on their way to becoming conventionalized, and once conventionalized, they become objective, and then, by definition, they are a part of meaning (and so, no longer are a matter of tone!).¹⁹

Note, however, transforming tone into something objective doesn’t require that a slur’s offensive content is asserted, queried, commanded, or presupposed by its uses. To see why, we turn to conventional implicatures (and indirectly expressives²⁰).

6. Conventional Implicature Items

Williamson and Potts each attempts to account for the various distributional reflexes of slurs we have been discussing by assimilating them to conventional implicature (CI) items. According to Grice (1961, 1989), (31) and (32), though they differ in meaning, are truth-conditionally equivalent.

(31) John is British *but* brave.

(32) John is British *and* brave.

(31) draws a contrast between being British and being brave that (32) does not; it is only “implied, as distinct from being stated” (Grice (1961), p. 127; cf. Grice (1989), p. 25 and Frege (1918), p. 522). The contrast is deemed conventional because anyone who understands ‘but’ must grasp it.²¹ Grice calls the contrast a *Conventional Implicature*.

Since the truth-value of a CI does not affect the truth-value of the entire sentence, the falsity of the contrast in (31) is alleged to be compatible with its truth. The contrast with slurring should be obvious. As Williamson and Potts note, the truth-value of a perpetrated offense does not impact on the truth-value of a slurring sentence. Regardless of your sentiments about the truth of the offense, if John is *not* African-American, (2) is false.

(2) John is a nigger.

(Opinion varies about whether (2) can be true, but this is irrelevant to the truth or falsity of its offense.)

Further, conventional (unlike conversational) implicatures are, by definition, *detachable*. Even though (31) and (32) are truth conditionally equivalent (according to Grice), they differ in what they imply. So too, whatever offense (2) potentially carries is *not* carried by its neutral counter-part (1), even though the evidence supports their truth conditional equivalence.

(1) John is an African-American.

As we saw above, what (1) and (2) assert is not easily teased apart (as evidenced by their behavior under denial and negation).

CI items characteristically generate inferences unchallengeable with objections like ‘No, that’s not true!’ The contrast generated by (31) cannot be rebuked by this sort of objection. Likewise, whatever offense an utterance of (2) generates cannot be challenged by this sort of objection either.

The inferences CI items generate are never *cancellable*. They cannot be felicitously retracted. Just as an assertion of (31) followed by a denial of the contrast is inappropriate or unacceptable, slurring is likewise never cancellable by denial. An assertion of (2) followed by (33) is unacceptable.

(33) But there is nothing offensive in saying so.

As Williamson emphasizes, to do so “adds hypocrisy to xenophobia” (Williamson, p. 150).²²

The inferences CI items generate invariably project out: no matter how deeply embedded a CI item is within a sentence, its inference always scopes out. The felicity of each of (34)–(36) requires a contrast between being British and being brave.

(34) It is false that John is British but brave.

(35) If John is British, but brave, then we are safe.

(36) John might be British, but brave.

Likewise, no matter how deeply embedded a slur is, its offense invariably projects outwards, as in the indirect report (16), the conditional (37), the disjunction (38) and the modal (39):

- (16) Eric said that a bitch ran for President of the United States in 2008.
- (37) If John is a nigger, then so is Ted.
- (38) Either Fred is a spic, or he is not.
- (39) Tom might be a chink.

Lastly, just as CIs are, as Grice insists, not ‘calculable’ neither are slurs; the inferences that both underwrite do not depend on what’s said, in context, being sufficiently implausible, uninformative, irrelevant or otherwise inappropriate; to understand them is to know immediately what they imply.

These commonalities certainly support Williamson’s and Potts’ conventional implicature proposals. One problem confronting them, however, is that some critics doubt CI items exist. Bach (pp. 339–40; cf. also Carston 2002, 2004), among others, argues that (40) suffices as a complete and accurate indirect report of Frank’s utterance of (31), but (41) does not.

- (31) John is British but brave.
- (40) Frank said that John is British but brave.
- (41) Frank said that John is British and brave.

Bach concludes that if ‘and’ cannot be used in accurately reporting Frank’s utterance of (31), then the contrast is not merely implied, but actually a part of what Frank *says*, contrary to Grice (pp. 25–26). (He argues the same for other standard candidate CI items, including ‘still’ and ‘even’.) Thus, though ‘but’ projects in many cases, according to Bach, it doesn’t within the scope of ‘say’ (and other attitudinal verbs).

Hom (p. 13) extends Bach’s criticism directly to a CI treatment of slurs. Eric’s utterance of (15), he would say, is incorrectly reported by (48) (but not by (16)).

- (15) A bitch ran for President of the United States in 2008.
- (16) Eric said that a bitch ran for President of the United States in 2008.
- (42) Eric said that a woman ran for President of the United States in 2008.

Though we remain neutral here about Bach’s objection to CI, Hom’s extension of it to slurs is mistaken. Though (42) is inoffensive, while (16) is, its offense, as we emphasized above, is *not* being attributed to Eric, but rather attaches to whoever is reporting him, and so, its offense is *not* being ascribed to Eric *as part of what he said*. Since Hom treats (16) as a correct report of what Eric said with (15), he unwittingly winds up agreeing with the CI account that its items project out of attitude complement clauses.²³

Even if this general skepticism about Grice’s paradigm CI items is justified, however, still there are, undeniably, constructions whose (a) falsity does *not* impact on the truth value of what is said, that (b) *are* perspectival (speaker oriented), (c) scopeless and, (d) whose content is *not* cancellable much like CI items are alleged to be. Among them are non-restrictive relative clauses (“John, whom I like, is Irish”), appositives (“JFK, the president, was assassinated in the 1960’s”) and epithets (“My

damn knee is acting up again”). There may be no consensus on their semantics, but it’s obvious they contribute content (cf. Potts 2005 for a semantic proposal of their behavior)). And it is *these* constructions that Potts wants to assimilate slurring to.²⁴

So, is the offense of a slur contributed to a discussion in the same manner as, e.g., a non-restrictive relative clause? When someone slurs is his offense something of an aside? Were this so, though, how can we explain why not every occurrence of a slur slurs.²⁵ After all, if its offense is part of its meaning, how can its non-slurring uses exist? We believe this worry about non-slurring uses of slurs extends to any account that pins the offensive potential of a slur on content. If we are right, a CI treatment of slurs cannot be right. Indeed, we go further. We are right, so no content based account can be correct.

7. Inert Content

A significant problem for all content-based strategies for accommodating slurs derives from an observation made by, among others, Hornsby, Williamson, and Saka, namely, a general exhortation against the use of slurs *rules out* the possibility of innocent semantic investigation. Obvious semantic disquotational truths like (49) turn out to be offensive (or ‘hostile’ Saka (p. 122)).

(43) ‘nigger’ means nigger.

“We have no truck with either the left- or right-hand side” (Hornsby p. 130). Williamson tells us “if one says ‘‘Boche’ means *Boche*’ . . . one is in danger of using the word ‘Boche’ in its italicized occurrence, not just mentioning it, and thereby of committing oneself to the xenophobic abuse” (Williamson, p. 142). He is surely right. But how can a content-based strategy account for its offensiveness?

The fact is that many content properties are simply *inert* inside meaning attributions:

“but’ means but’ draws *no* contrast.

“the man’ means the man’ does *not* presuppose uniqueness.

“ouch’ means ouch’ does not express a state of mind.

The reason for this inertness is not because the words on their right hand sides are (implicitly) mentioned (and not used); we *can*, after all, substitute synonyms inside meaning attributions.

‘bachelor’ means unmarried man.

How is a content-based strategist going to explain how slurs inside these attributions (ever) have the power to offend if their content properties in such contexts are inert?

This critical point extends even to quotational uses of slurs. Such uses are sometimes as off-putting as regular ones. But quotation famously renders content inert:

replacing synonyms inside quotation marks can easily change truth value, as in (44)–(45), even though the quoted expressions are synonymous:

- (44) ‘bachelor’ has eight letters.
 (45) ‘unmarried man’ has eight letters.

Yet the occurrence of ‘nigger’ in (46) can easily cause alarm and offense.

- (46) ‘nigger’ is a term for blacks.

Not all authors endorse our assessment. Potts writes, “to report the racist’s use of ‘nigger’, we have to either resort to paraphrase or quotation—indicated with quote marks when written or with heavy intonation when spoken” (Potts, pp. 161–62); and Hornsby (p. 129) claims quotation permits non-offensive use of slurs (“quotation has some sealing off effect” (Hornsby, p. 130));²⁶ and Williamson proclaims “mere quotation marks . . . isolate us from [a slur’s] derogatory implications” (Williamson, p. 139).²⁷

We disagree; witness the widespread preference for ‘the N-word’ (and its ilk), which describes or names a slur without using *or* mentioning it. Why should this widespread practice persist if the offense of a slur is a matter of content?

Someone may respond that the reason some speakers use “the N-word” instead of mentioning the slur is because they are sensitive to the fact that others might not recognize they are making a quotational use of the word, and *not* using it. That is a possible explanation for its usage in some contexts, but it doesn’t seem to fit those contexts where it is clear that a quotational use is what is in view. News telecasts, for instance, are paradigmatic reporting contexts. It is less likely that substitution of the description for the slur is motivated by fear of being understood as using the term rather than to merely reporting it.

We caution those who would charge anyone offended by a quotative use of a slur with use-mention confusion. An explanation of the phenomenon that doesn’t describe its participants as confused or ignorant is obviously preferable.^{28,29} Moreover, those who would challenge these cases cannot be challenging the data—people *are* sometimes offended by these uses. It only makes sense to charge those offended with confusion in the context of a theoretical stance about what (should) render slurs offensive.

In short, though Richard tells us “slurs are conventional means of expressing derogatory attitudes towards their targets” (Richard, p. 12); and Kaplan says that what makes slurs derogatory “is their meaning” (Kaplan, p. 38), our investigations have resulted in skepticism over content-based accounts of slurs. Whereas Richard claims that “what makes a word a slur is that it is used to *do* certain things, that it has . . . a certain illocutionary potential” (p. 1), Hornsby grants that no systematic correlation between their semantics and the speech acts they perform is possible; she still clings, however, to the view that slurs carry offensive content—albeit, content that resists paraphrase into other words. Why, though, can’t these meanings be re-expressed? What accounts for this sentiment in the literature of ineffability (Potts

2007)? Why, if “there is arguably a relatively small number of things normally conveyed by a slur’s use, from which anyone who understands the slur will tend to draw its interpretation” (Richard, p. 7), can’t we introduce expressions with these exact same contents?

The conclusion we extract from this critical journey is that no special contents need³⁰ attach to a slur or its uses to accommodate its potential to offend; it’s a mistake to seek them. We turn to our alternative explanation.

8. Slurs as Prohibited Words

When a word is prohibited, then whoever violates its prohibition risks offending those who respect it. Presumably, prohibitions include deeply embedded occurrences of the word: embedding, we know, sometimes renders semantic properties of an expression inert, but it cannot nullify its occurrence and the prohibition is against *that*. Our proposal is this: slurs are prohibited words. Adopting it explains:

- (a) why we cannot “unilaterally detach the affect, hatred and negative connotations tied to most slurs and use them interchangeably with their neutral counterparts” (Richard, p. 62).
- (b) why occurrences of slurs inside semantic attributions or within quotations can still inflict an offense.³¹ Prohibited words are usually prohibited everywhere they occur!³²

This explains our reluctance to evaluate slurring sentences, even when they are semantically vacuous (as with (47)) or quotative (as with (48)); and why bystanders (even when silent) are uncomfortable, often embarrassed, when confronted by a slur.

- (47) ‘nigger’ means nigger.
- (48) ‘nigger’ is a derogatory word.

Whatever offenses these confrontations exact, the audience risks complicity, as if the offense were thrust upon them—not because of any content it or its uses communicate, or because of surrounding beliefs and intents, but because of a responsibility we all have in ensuring certain violations are prevented; when they are not, they must be reported and possibly punished. Their occurrences taint us all.³³

- (c) why slurring people by using another’s term is ineluctable (except through direct quotation).

Indirect reports and other attitudinal ascriptions fail to attribute slurring to whomever they report since the offense of the reporter “screens off,” so to speak, the offense of whoever is being reported. Going further than Hornsby’s declaration that slurs are “absolutely useless (p. 130)”, we insist upon *silentism* as policy. A use, mention, or interaction with a slur, *ceteris paribus* (more below), constitutes an infraction. Its unusability is *not* due to “clusters of beliefs or attitudes . . . and

tendencies to favour certain inferences” (Blackburn, p. 149) nor to an “attitude of contempt” (Saka, p. 128) that its perpetrators harbor. We cringe when confronted by slurs *because* they usually admit of no tolerable uses. But what is the etiology of its status as a slur if not through content it communicates?

Words become prohibited for all sorts of reasons, e.g., by a directive or edict of an authoritative figure. It might even be coined to signify something abusive or offensive about a particular group, and so, prohibited because of its explicit meaning (though our arguments establish that whatever content a slur carries cannot explain all its distributional features, e.g., its behavior under all of its embeddings). Or, it might become prohibited because of a tainted history of associations; perhaps, it conjures up past pernicious or injurious events. The history of its uses, combined with reasons of self-determination, is exactly how the word ‘colored’, once used by African-Americans self-referentially, became prohibited, and thereby, offensive.³⁴ It may have become prohibited because of *who* introduced or used it. This is the sentiment of a high school student who objected to W.E.B. Dubois’ use of ‘Negro’: he wrote, “The word, “Negro,” or “nigger”, is a white man’s word . . .”³⁵

What’s clear is that no matter what its history, no matter what it means or communicates, no matter who introduces it, regardless of its past associations, *once relevant individuals declare a word a slur, it becomes one.*³⁶ By and large, those relevant individuals are targeted members, but they needn’t be.³⁷ And who counts as relevant is tricky as well. When the Reverend Jesse Jackson proclaimed at the 1988 Democratic National Convention that from then on the word ‘black’ should not be used, his effort failed. Many African-Americans carried positive associations with the term (‘Black Panthers’, ‘Black Power’, ‘I’m black and I’m proud’) and so Jackson’s attempted prohibition did not stick; people resisted treating it as a slur.

One might wonder whether a prohibition over time doesn’t by itself endow a slur with conventionalized content. Though dictating or even legislating use can obviously provoke meaning change, it needn’t. When a king banishes the language of his vanquished foes, his decree will certainly modify behavior but it won’t change what the banished words mean or what they reference.³⁸ Likewise, a word needn’t change designation or meaning once deemed a slur. Its associations might change, but to infer they are responsible for its high offense potential is to put the cart before the horse.³⁹

If our proposal is correct, anything *said* with ‘nigger’ is better served by ‘black’ or ‘African-American’. Even negative attitudes are better served by insult than by slurring, since slurs needn’t *express* insults. Their linguistic role is exhausted in picking out the same group as a neutral counter-part.⁴⁰

What about the objection that (49) and (50) are not equally trivial?

(49) African-Americans are African-Americans.

(50) African-Americans are niggers.

According to Hom, “Competent speakers are rationally compelled to accept [49] as trivial, while most would reject [50] as non-trivial, racist and false” (p. 8). To

accept (50) as false is to accept its negation as true and we doubt informants who reject (50) are any more inclined to accept its negation. As regards its racism, we couldn't agree more; it's racist, in most contexts, to use 'nigger'. African-Americans are clear that they consider this term offensive, and so, anyone who uses it offends them, by using a word that they have banished. Its uses are racist, because the only feature that holds the target group together is race (or at least presumed race). As regards its non-triviality, we wonder whether it is any less trivial than any other identity between synonymous words or co-referring names (cf. the *locus classicus* Kripke (1979) for further discussion).

We agree with Hornsby, who declares that “[a] unified account of a [slur] cannot be achieved by identifying a pragmatic ingredient to be added to a semantic one given by the word’s neutral counterpart, because *only the word itself provides the outlook from which one can make sense of the variety of associated speech acts*” (Hornsby, p. 135; our emphasis). We part ways when she attempts to anchor this variety in potential to the meanings of slurs. She says a slur has the “potential for making speech acts because of what it means” (*ibid*, p. 135). Insults are almost invariably inappropriate or wrong because of what they mean and convey; but when a slur is prohibited, no assertion, query, command, presupposition, or conventional implicature is lost or altered.

We concur with Feinberg, who says offensive words are generated by word-taboos. These taboos have “inhibiting force” that constrains their usage. Lenny Bruce got it right when he proclaimed, “the suppression of *the word* gives it the power, the violence, the viciousness”. This is why it is impossible to reform a slur until it has been removed from common use.⁴¹ However, Feinberg cautions against trying to compile a list of offensive words into a single cohesive category. This would mislead us into “embracing simplistic half-truths” by “extend[ing] a point that applies to one subgroup to cover all the others” (Feinberg, p. 192). What makes a word offensive varies with its different sources and functions. Words like ‘thief’ and ‘prostitute’ are offensive because of what they mean; not slurs.

What about discrepancies in intensity? The slurs ‘nigger’, ‘honkey’, ‘mick’, ‘cracker’, ‘wop’, ‘limey’, and ‘boche’ are *not* equally explosive. Even co-extensive slurs like ‘nigger’, ‘spook’, ‘jigaboo’ and ‘darkie’ for African-Americans, ‘kike’, ‘hymie’, and ‘yid’ for Jewish people, and ‘dago’, ‘wop’ and ‘guinea’ for Italians, differ in offensive intensity. The ‘Word Association’ skit from *Saturday Night Live* illustrates the point.

Chevy Chase, while interviewing Richard Pryor for a janitorial position, runs a word association test.⁴² He begins with ordinary words like ‘tree’ and ‘bean’, and then shifts to a series of slurs for African-Americans beginning with ‘tar baby’. As he runs through this series, Pryor becomes more and more irate. When Chase finally blurts out ‘nigger’, Pryor responds with ‘dead honkey’. His response reflects a recognized asymmetry in offensiveness among co-extensive slurs.

Why is it worse to slur African-Americans with ‘nigger’ than with other slurs or Irishmen with ‘mick’? Has silentism served its function in these cases? Do sufficiently long campaigns against the uses of certain slurs eventually ameliorate them? Targets with investments in seeing a word removed from circulation, those for whom the slur conjures painful memories or histories of discrimination, are

more affronted by confrontations with some slurs than others are. In contrast, as fewer individuals acknowledge offense, it comes to pass, contingent on authority, station, or relevance, that offensive intensity is lost or diminished—the campaign to prohibit the word thereby effectively ends.

How this diminution is achieved, we doubt, admits of a simple or single answer. We doubt the phenomena constitute a homogenous front, but the practice of appropriation illuminates the process in one sort of case.

9. Appropriation

How is it possible that sometimes “slurs can be used without displaying contempt or causing hurt” (Richard, p. 13)? Why is it that when an African-American reports another’s slur with (51), his use need not be offensive?

(51) He said that I was a nigger.

Richard goes further, denying “racism in a [slur’s] use by comedians to make fun of or criticize various attitudes and behaviors of both he who slurs and he who is slurred” (Richard, p. 14); and that a slur “can be sometimes used non-offensively in indirect discourse or narrative to portray someone else’s racist remark or attitude”. Hom says (52) “makes meaningful uses of racial [slurs] that are true, non-derogatory and non-appropriated” (p. 429) and that it is “true, meaningful and felicitous” (Hom, p. 429).

(52) Institutions that treat Chinese people as chinks are racist.

Hornsby tells us ‘‘He is *not* a nigger’ can be said in order to reject the derogatory nigger’ (Hornsby, p. 129). And, of course, the most common alleged inoffensive uses of slurs are so-called appropriated or reclaimed uses commandeered by their targets.

Frankly, we are more than a little skeptical about some of these data: first and perhaps foremost, as already indicated, slurs in indirect discourse are often offensive.⁴³ Reporters do not usually get a pass. Secondly, the universal condemnation of Michael Richards’ explosion of racial slurs as he performed his comedy routine at an L.A. comedy club establishes that comedians do not always get a pass. A case could be made that Richard’s tirade was not integral to his comedic routine but rather a reflection of racism. What then do we say about the case of comedian Andy Dick, who onstage dropped the N-word on a room full of stunned patrons? He intended his use to be a comedic commentary on Richard’s use, yet no one laughed.⁴⁴

Despite these (and other) reservations about some cases cited as inoffensive uses of slurs, no one can deny that such uses exist. There are legitimate cases of reclamation where targeted members consciously employ a slur on each other, often in a positive and defiant way. How is that possible? How do these uses differ from their slurring uses?

Richard, a content-based strategist, tells us “there is a case to be made that in appropriation there [is] a change in meaning” (Richard, p. 9). Likewise, Hom (p. 428) writes that an appropriated use of slurs “alters its meaning for use with the group”; and Saka speaks of the felt ‘camaraderie’ as part of the meaning of ‘nigger’ (Saka, p. 145); appropriation is when “. . . some victim group attempts to change the conventional meaning of some term” (Saka, p. 146). With appropriation “the homosexual use of ‘queer’ inhibits the straight public from using ‘queer’ to express contempt” (Saka, p. 146). Most contemporary dictionaries, indeed, include separate entries for appropriated slurs, e.g. under ‘nigger’ we find an entry that specifies a meaning as acknowledging kinship or closeness in contrast to its ordinary use which is often marked derogatory.⁴⁵

We reject any ambiguity thesis to account for these data. Ambiguity fails to explain why non-members cannot utilize a second sense. If it were *just* a matter of distinct meanings, why can’t any speaker opt to use a slur non-offensively? And what about those inoffensive uses where a targeted member reports on a racist’s slur, as with (51)? Ambiguity is useless here; we want these uses to carry their alleged first meaning: otherwise, their use would belie the point of the report.

What is happening in these cases? Could it be that when in-group members use ‘nigger’ with each other that by flouting a Gricean maxim, they thereby convey something non-derogatory—something along the lines of ‘friend’ or ‘buddy’?⁴⁶ Since members of the target group are, *prima facie*, unlikely to derogate their own group (though see Kennedy, pp. vx–vxi), can we infer such uses flout the maxim of quality—saying what is believed false—and thereby a conversational implicature (along the lines of irony) is created? And when a non-black delivers the same slur, he fails to ground an implicature because it is *not* obvious he is flouting a maxim? So construed, individuals who slur with uses of ‘nigger’ and those who do not say the same thing but create different conversational implicatures. Notice a speaker can cancel this implicature. Nothing in principle precludes a target member from slurring his own group.⁴⁷

Whatever its attractions we are doubtful this explanation can be made to work since we see no argument why non-targeted members cannot set up the same implicatures targeted members do. Our own explanation is that in cases of appropriation, a target group member can opt to use a slur *without* violating its prohibition because *his* membership provides a defeasible escape clause; most prohibitions invariably include such clauses. Oil embargos permit exportation, just not importation. Sanctions against nations invariably exclude medical supplies. Why shouldn’t prohibitions against slurs exempt certain individuals under certain conditions for appropriating a banned word? African-Americans are permitted under certain circumstances to call each other ‘nigger’; gays can call each other ‘queer’,⁴⁸ women ‘bitches’, and so it goes through most target groups.

Once appropriation is sufficiently widespread, it might even come to pass that the prohibition on a slur eases, permitting—under highly regulated circumstances—designated outside members access to an appropriated use. (Cf. Kennedy’s discussion of van Vechten’s use of the N-word in correspondence with his friend Langston Hughes (pp. 42–43).) Once this practice becomes sufficiently widespread, the slur, as in the case of ‘suit’, ‘Tory’, and ‘limey’, loses its offensive intensity.⁴⁹

How such escape clauses are fashioned and what sustains them is a complex matter—one we cannot take up here.⁵⁰

Conclusion

We began by saying we would propose a deflationary account of slurs and we have. Every other discussion of slurs resorts either to semantics or pragmatics in explaining slurring behavior: slurs offend because of information they somehow communicate. Differences are over implementation. We have railed against all content-based strategies. Though the data temptingly encourage various exotic semantic and logical proposals, though they strongly suggest slurs are linguistically “marked to display . . . disrespect” (Kaplan, p. 34), none of these proposals we have argued stands up to scrutiny. We have replaced them with a simple proposal: slurs are prohibited words; and as such, their uses are offensive to whomever these prohibitions matter.

Notes

¹ Earlier drafts of this paper were presented at Oxford University, Universities of Siena, St Petersburg, London, Paris, and Oslo, Washington University, MIT Northwestern and Yale. We thank these audiences. Special thanks go to Jeff King, Karen Lewis, Ofra Magidor, Howard McGary, Jason Stanley, Mathew Stone, and especially John Hawthorne and an anonymous referee for this journal.

² Slurs normally function as nouns or adjectives, but also as adverbs, in ‘Don’t go postal on me’; grammatical subjects, in ‘Niggers are bad’; parts of determiner phrases, in ‘the wop’ and ‘every spic’, and verbs, in ‘Don’t Jew me’. Given how easy it is to turn nouns into verbs—it’s surprising more aren’t slurs.

³ People sometimes use a slur to pick out individuals not in the extension of its neutral ‘counterpart’. But this need not be a problem. Shakespeare used ‘lion’ to pick out Richard and ‘the sun’ to pick out Juliet. These are non-literal uses. (More interestingly, some speakers use slurs to target only a subclass of the extension of a neutral ‘counterpart’; Chris Rock tells us he “love[s] black people but . . . hate[s] niggers” (*HBO Special*).

⁴ The occasional attribution of derogatory content to slurs leaves unexplained why some are worse than others; why should uses of ‘nigger’ be more offensive than those of ‘kraut’ if both mean their target ‘is despicable’ (Saka, p. 121); or ‘is a fit object for derision’ (Blackburn, 1984, p. 148)? And why should uses of ‘nigger’ be more offensive than those of ‘spook’ if both mean something along the lines of African-Americans are inferior?

⁵ Hom (p. 438) endorses the view that “one can correctly discuss important aspects of racism towards Chinese people in uttering sentences like . . . [a] and [b]”:

- (a) There are no chinks; racists are wrong.
- (b) Yao Ming is Chinese, but he’s not a chink.

⁶ As we will see below, it’s not clear (10) is inoffensive.

⁷ *Contra* Richard (p. 49), who agrees that (16) fails to capture what (15) says, but only because he holds that (16) needn’t slur at all. Neither we nor any of our informants can retrieve his inoffensive reading without the addition of some special marking.

⁸ One might find it difficult to attribute such a report to a xenophobe. However, this may be due to an ambiguity in the use of ‘offensively.’ On one reading, the offense turns on the subjective state of the speaker, i.e. she experiences a disliked mental state. On another reading, however, the speaker merely recognizes some course of action would likely bring about the occurrence of a disliked mental state in someone else. It is perfectly reasonable to think a xenophobe, though not personally offended, could recognize an act as causing offense in others.

⁹ We *can* ascribe the use of a particular slur to another with direct quotation of course, as in:

- (d) John shockingly said the word ‘nigger’.

Note, though, that even in directly quoting a slur we risk being offensive; reporters preferably replace mentioned slurs with descriptions, as in:

(e) John shockingly said the N-word.

We'll return to this point below.

¹⁰ Likewise, for the future, "If you call me [by my first name] one more time . . . I'll call you 'nigger'" (Kennedy, p. 72).

¹¹ We see the same effect within the scope of adverbial quantification. The offense of "Whenever Bob goes to the movies, some spic sits in front of him" is localized to its time and place of utterance; not to occasions when Bob goes to the movies.

¹² Whether presupposition is best construed semantically or pragmatically doesn't matter for our discussion; what does matter is whether a notion of content is in play that accounts for the offensive nature of slurs. And so we will try to remain as neutral as we can on the debate over whether presupposition is a semantic or pragmatic phenomenon. However, regardless of how that debate plays out, our criticisms stick.

¹³ For slurring sentence S, most of us "will not say that S is true: [we] will simply say, 'I should never say that' or 'No one should ever say that'" (Dummett 2002, p. 527).

¹⁴ Many authors insist slurring sentences are false or without truth value (cf., Saka, p. 124; Richard, pp. 45–46). We are not so sure; nor are we sure why these authors believe that withholding truth-values from slurring sentences would explain their offensive nature. Richard, in denying that sentences like (5) and (6) lack truth-value, insists "we should reject both of these claims" (p. 26). But their "outright rejection" (p. 61) is no less offensive than their affirmation. See §6.

¹⁵ Thanks to Jeff King and Karen Lewis for pointing this out.

¹⁶ One must resist the temptation to read this sentence meta-linguistically; particularly, if we can accurately report on another slurring who speaks a different language. Of course, see §3, we believe that slurs are speaker oriented so that the slurring in (32') attached to the reporter and not Frank.

¹⁷ Ch. 1 of Kennedy is full of illustrations of painful confrontations with racial slurs issued by speakers nonchalantly or in contexts where the intent was to be generous or helpful.

¹⁸ "...coloring and shading [i.e. tone] are not objective, and must be evoked by each hearer or reader according to the hints of the poet or the speaker" (Frege 1892, p. 61).

¹⁹ Frege himself, though he defines tone as subjective, only ever employs examples conventional in nature; he speaks of 'cur' as *carrying a negative association* that 'dog' does not—suggesting a generally recognized feature of the uses of these two words (Frege 1979, p. 140).

²⁰ Several authors look to expressive words like 'Ouch' and 'Wow' for an account of slurs. Expressives don't so much describe "something which either is or is not the case" (Kaplan, p. 8) but rather "display" (Kaplan, p. 9) it; ("slurs are devices used to display contempt" (Richard, p. 13)). Expressive words, unlike, say, an expressive hand or facial gesture (Hornsby, p. 140), carry objective meaning; they are not mere grunts or groans. Competent speakers must know appropriate uses. Upon bumping into a long lost friend a woman exclaims "Wow!" and thereby, displays her state of wonder. She isn't asserting or describing her wonder, nor does her use presuppose or pragmatically convey it. Her exclamation is linguistically appropriate only if she is in a state of wonder. The rules of appropriate use are conventionalized; they concern objective meaning, but, still, these meanings contribute along a dimension separate from regular descriptive content; they don't contribute to truth-conditions. According to Kaplan and Richard, slurs conventionally display attitudes towards their targets:

. . . the word "honky" is a derogatory term for a Caucasian. Anyone who claims to be using it in a non-derogatory sense is also making a linguistic error (Kaplan, p. 7).

. . . a word is a slur when it is a conventional means to express strong negative attitudes towards members of a group (Richard, p. 1).

Space limitations preempt elaboration on an expressivist account of slurs; however, since, as we will argue, it suffers the same critical flaws as the conventional implicature account we are about to discuss, we reserve criticism until completing discussion of the latter.

²¹ “An Englishman in Italy who thinks that ‘ma’ is synonymous with ‘and’ and ‘e’ with ‘but’ is mistaken, for ‘e’ is synonymous with ‘and’, not with ‘but’, and ‘ma’ is synonymous with ‘but’, not with ‘and’. Fully to understand a word, one must have some awareness, however explicit, of the conventional implicatures that it generates” (Williamson, p. 152).

Hom insists upon treating conventional implicatures as pragmatic and not semantic. We suppose he thinks this since if the contrast fails, then (37) is only inappropriate to affirm but not false or without truth value. However, since, according to Grice, the contrast involves aspects of conventional meaning rather than general principles of rational communication, it *is* linguistic.

²² Potts’ characterization of CI items excludes slurs automatically since they compositionally contribute to what’s asserted. The slur ‘nigger’ cannot be removed from (2) without rendering it ungrammatical.

²³ Though intuitions here are subtle, we are not sure the point doesn’t extend to ‘but’ as well. Is the reporter or the reportee drawing the contrast according to (46)?

²⁴ One problem with this assimilation derives from Potts himself, who argues (Potts *et al*) that expressive words contribute a dimension of meaning separable from what descriptive words do. One argument for the separation is based on distributional differences, e.g., the distinct behaviors of descriptive vs. expressive words in balanced constructions such as, ‘NP or no NP’, and ‘X and X alone’, as in, “Water or no water—I am not hiking in this heat” and “I’ll talk to the president and the president alone”. These constructions demand strict identity, so strict that even synonymous substitutions induce imbalance, as in, “*Water or no H₂O—I’m not hiking in this heat” and “*I’ll talk to the president and the chief executive alone”. Expressive words, however, are exempt from this restriction, as in, “Water or no fucking water—I’m not hiking in this heat”, or “I’ll talk to the damn president and the president alone”.

On these bases (and others), Potts *et al* impose an identity requirement on the realization of descriptive contents alone. But if they are right, then the contribution that slurs make is more descriptive than expressive, since the following constructions reflect an imbalance: “*Nigger or no African-American—we are not hiring him” and “*I’ll talk to the wop and the Italian alone”. This critical point extends to every construction Potts *et al* invoke to separate expressive from descriptive words (e.g., pluractional constructions, ellipsis), suggesting that whatever contribution slurs make it is unlike an expressive.

²⁵ We take as linguistic data occurrences of slurs in certain didactic contexts and so-called appropriations that are non-slurring. For example, the use of ‘fag’ among some members of the gay community or the use of ‘nigga’ and all of its variations among members of the African-American community are appropriated uses that are not received as offensive, at least among its users. We are not claiming, however, that such uses are unequivocally inoffensive. In fact, among the African-American community there is a vocal contingent who opposes any appropriated use of ‘nigga’, not as a slurring use but for what they consider indirect participation in proliferating racist ideas about Blacks among out-groups.

²⁶ In a footnote (p. 130), Hornsby acknowledges that “even quotation of derogatory words can cause affront”. But later (p. 139) she imagines (without encouraging) a semanticist who “should be man enough to get past the fastidiousness that leads to denying [slurs] a role in theory”.

²⁷ Cf., also, Williamson (p. 152), where he suggests that mentioning a slur isn’t slurring. Hom (p. 427) speaks of “appropriate uses” of slurs including “explicit quotation in the courtroom”. We do not concede these cases; even sensitive non-members wince when someone quotes another’s use of ‘nigger’.

²⁸ We also caution those who tell us that it is possible create an atmosphere where all the participants in a discussion feel sufficiently comfortable with each other to discuss slurs without provoking insults. We’ll try to explain what we think is going on in these cases in the last section of our paper.

²⁹ A more controversial challenge is raised by the offensive potential of some *incidental* uses of slurs, as witnessed by the Washington D.C. official who wound up resigning his job over the outcry his use of ‘niggardly’ provoked. In 1999, David Howard (head of the Office of Public Advocate in Washington, DC) used it during a discussion with a black colleague in describing a budget allocation he considered inadequate. He was reported as saying, “I will have to be niggardly with this fund because it’s not going to be a lot of money”. Despite a similarity in spelling, his word has no semantic or etymological tie

to ‘nigger’; but the mere phonetic and orthographic overlap caused as much a stir as more standard offensive language. This case is not one of an accidental use of an ambiguous or an unknown slur, but rather one of an *incidental* one. (One might be tempted to invoke *conversational implicature* here to explain the case. Some seem to think Howard should have known his use of the word would cause a stir, if for no other reason than that it is not a word frequently used anymore. Even if true, it won’t be true generally. Former White House Press Secretary Tony Snow once used the expression “hug the tar baby” to express his desire to avoid a sticky situation. The context of Snow’s statement made it clear what he intended to convey, yet his use of ‘tar baby’ still offended.) This datum, however peculiar, should not be ignored (cf. Kennedy, pp. 94–95). But a content-based strategy is obviously useless in this regard.

³⁰ ‘need’ because we don’t want to exclude someone introducing a word that offends because of its meaning.

³¹ Hom correctly (p. 435) observes that every occurrence of a slur can provoke “feelings of squeamishness . . . not only embedded under negation, conditional antecedents, questions, intensional and fictional contexts, but also . . . under quotation, in contexts of appropriation, and even to mere phonological variants . . .” but he discounts these intuitions as counter-evidence for content-based accounts of slurs, saying, “these words are so highly charged, our intuitions have limited value from the outset, and it would be hardly surprising if, at least in some cases, our intuitions were even misleading” (p. 435). He is comfortable ignoring these data since he’s convinced his own semantic proposal better accommodates the linguistic behavior of slurs than every other semantic and pragmatic proposal. We concur with him about the bankruptcy of semantic and pragmatic proposals, but, unlike Hom, we deny that these sorts of proposals exhaust the realm of explanation. Slurs are offensive *not* because of what they mean or convey, but rather because their uses are prohibited, and so, they offend those for whom these prohibitions matter.

³² It might even explain incidental occurrences. Though the word ‘nigger’ does not occur in ‘niggardly’ (they bear no etymological relation to each other), utterances of the latter can still offend. The prohibition on some words is so severe speakers are well advised to steer clear even of phonologically and orthographically similar words. Obviously, in these cases an audience makes a determination whether an incident is accidental or not. Kennedy documents numerous opinions on the ‘niggardly’ incident according to which the speaker, knowing full well he was addressing an African-American audience, should have chosen any of numerous other synonymous words, words much less infrequently used.

³³ Slurs in this regard are like the swastika—a symbol with a benign history long before the Nazis, but whose appropriation so contaminated it that even historically incidental tokenings are charged and offensive to many. Thanks to Ofra Magidor for the analogy.

³⁴ See Baugh (1991).

³⁵ Dubois (1928).

³⁶ This is equivalent to coining a new usage of a word. The new use only becomes established if a sufficient number of people accept it as such. Thanks to the anonymous referee for this point.

³⁷ We can imagine slurs for infants or the severely mentally disabled.

³⁸ Thanks to Jason Stanley.

³⁹ Further, a word’s meaning needn’t change because it ceases to be a slur either. When the Black Panthers and others during the 1960’s were reclaiming ‘black’ as a positive designation for black people, it was less about a meaning-change and more about a change in psychology. Thus, Eldridge Cleaver writes, “I think the slogan of Black Power was a recognition of the change in the psychology of black people, that in fact they have *seized upon their blackness* [emphasis added] and rallied around the elements or the points at which they were oppressed. They have turned the focal point of the oppression into the focal point of the struggle for national liberation” (1968).

⁴⁰ Note that the non-detachability of a slur can now be explained since slurring is not a function of content but rather of the word itself. The slur is not detachable from its linguistic form.

⁴¹ Elimination may be preferable to rehabilitation or amelioration. There are, for example, what Kennedy (p. 36) calls ‘eradicationists’ who “seek to drive ‘nigger’ out of rap, comedy, and all other categories of entertainment even when (perhaps *especially* when) blacks themselves are the ones using the N-word”. However, in some cases words began their lives as slurs, but have since become ‘neutral’, as with ‘Quaker’, ‘Yankee’, ‘Tory’, and ‘Whig’.

⁴² The skit is recounted in Kennedy, pp. 24–25.

⁴³ Richard (p. 28) is compelled to say otherwise about indirect discourse because he claims that slurring sentences lack truth-values altogether but he also doesn't want to deny we can correctly indirectly report another's slur. He allows for a true attribution to Eric with (16):

(16) Eric said that a bitch ran for President of the United States in 2008.

We as a matter of fact cannot retrieve Richard's intuition that whoever utters (16) need not slur. Nor do we believe that sentences like (16) succeed in ascribing slurs to others. See §3 above.

⁴⁴ Incidentally, finding a joke containing a slur funny doesn't mean its use is automatically sanctioned. A distinction can be made between an emotion being *fitting* (in this case, laughter) and it being *appropriate*. For further discussion of this point, see D'Arms and Jacobson (2000).

⁴⁵ Smitherman (pp. 210–211) identifies seven appropriated meanings for 'nigga', including 'close friend', 'someone culturally Black', someone 'cool, hip'.

⁴⁶ Some distinguish 'nigger' from 'nigga', with the former carrying its usual racist sense and the latter an appropriated sense. We reject this claim and suggest it is merely a stylistic variant. 'Nigga', in the mouth of a white person, for instance, is unacceptable, as evidenced in the case of Valley Traditional High School (Kentucky) teacher Paul Dawson, a Caucasian, who received the longest suspension in the history of the school system for using this stylistic version of the N-word in a miscalculated effort to project camaraderie with his African-American students.

⁴⁷ We are not saying nothing can be said save what your mother advised about not using 'bad' words. We want to allow for a pragmatic account about what happens to a word use-wise before and after it is banned.

⁴⁸ The literature on reclamation certainly doesn't make it seem easy to specify what these escape clauses are. " 'queer' is a way of reminding us how we are perceived by the rest of the world" (Kaplan 1992, p. 36); "to take up 'queer' is at once to recognize and revolt against homophobia" (Bronstema, p. 4), and queer serves "to mark distance from the alleged exclusionary and assimilationist 'gay' and 'lesbian'" (*ibid.*, p. 4).

⁴⁹ "We have to take the q-word back in order for it not to cause pain" (Thomas, p. 79).

⁵⁰ One referee claimed our proposal that slurs are banished words fails to account for 'positive epithets,' which obviously are not banished words. Two examples from Potts are polite 2nd person pronouns in Russian, German and French and honorifics in Japanese. A further example is "Sabra", generally used as a term of endearment to refer to Israelis born in the country, though apparently derogatory in its original use. This is either confusion or a change of topic. Our interest is in the offense potential of certain expressions; if they have none, we are interested in how they lost it; if they never had any, we are not interested in them. Slurs slur!

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