

Lying with Slurs and Other Evaluative Terms

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Abstract

Are slurring statements, when applied to members of the slurred group, true, false, or a little bit of both? Intuitions are mixed. And investigating more truth-value judgments is unlikely to cure the stalemate we find ourselves in. Truth-value judgments are just not up to the task. In their place, I propose we look to judgments of lying instead. This change in focus provides a new and better tool for understanding the complex semantics and pragmatics of slurs. As I argue, it also suggests that slurring statements encode, conventionally implicate and presuppose the same information as statements with the slur's neutral counterpart. I then briefly apply this style of argument to the semantics and pragmatics of evaluative language more generally.

Keywords— Slurs, Evaluative Terms, Lying, Semantics

1 Introduction

Many of us feel uncomfortable assessing the truth-value of slurring statements. Making salient this discomfort, consider:

- (1) Benjamin is a Chi*k.
Context: Benjamin is Chinese.

On the one hand, we non-racists would strongly resist affirming that (1) is true. As Mark Richard continues:

After all, if we admit its truth, we must believe that it is true that [Benjamin is a Chi*k]. And if we think that, we think that [Benjamin is a Chi*k]. We think, that is, what and as the racist thinks. (2008: 3-4)

As none of us wish to concede that we think what and as the racist does, we refrain from accepting (1) as true.

On the other hand, slurring statements sometimes appear to be extensionally equivalent to statements where the slur is replaced with its neutral counterpart. Adapting an example from Camp 2018: 32, consider a racist who offers you the following bet.

- (2) I'll donate \$100 dollars to the charity of your choice if there are more than 10 Chi*ks in the room.

If you know that there are more than 10 Chinese people in the room, winning the bet seems to be a sure thing. This suggests that 'Chi*k' contributes nothing at the level of truth-conditions over and above its neutral counterpart. In other words, slurring statements like (1) are true.

Truth-value judgments of slurring statements—as well as judgments of what is said and whether two speakers agree or disagree—are notoriously nonuniform, unstable and subject to extraneous 'noise'. These obstacles have led to an intractable stalemate.¹ For these reasons, we would do well to lessen our focus on such judgments as a guide to the semantics and pragmatics of slurs. In their place—and in the spirit of Michaelson (2016)—I propose that we look to judgments of lying instead.

Lie judgments are intimately connected to truth-values. Liars assert information they believe to be false, while non-liars only assert information they do not believe to be false. Despite this intimate connection, lie judgments are not susceptible to the same ills as truth-value judgments. To illustrate this, consider Sally's utterance of (3) in response to Henry inquiring about Zachary's race.

- (3) Zachary is a Ch*nk.

Context-a: Sally knows that Zachary is Chinese, and she has a derogatory attitude towards Chinese people.

Context-b: Sally knows that Zachary is Irish, not Chinese. She is trying to deceive Henry, her racist friend, about Zachary being Chinese.

As is hopefully clear, Sally *does not lie* in (3a), but *does lie* in (3b). These first lie judgments demonstrate two things. First, speakers can lie with slurs, but not all slurring statements are lies. Second, our lie judgments, at least in these two contexts, are not uncomfortable,

¹Similar sentiments regarding the difficulties truth-value judgments pose are raised by many, including Dummett (1980: 527), Richard (2008: 12-41) and Bach (2018: 65-66). For an instance of this stalemate, see the judgments of Hom and May (2013) and Sennet and Copp (2015). Of course, truth-value judgments are not the only tool available to those working on slurs. Theories can be tested against how slurs linguistically behave (e.g., their projective behaviour).

heterogeneous or unstable in the same way as our truth-value judgment of (1). We find similarly clear judgments with other uses of *canonical slurs*—slurs like ‘Ki*e’, ‘Sp*c’ and ‘Fag*ot’.² Racist or homophobic speakers who use these slurs for Jews, Hispanics, or homosexual men do not lie. While speakers who use these slurs to deceive their audiences about someone’s race, ethnicity, or sexual orientation do lie.

Little of interest to the semantics and pragmatics of slurs arises from examples like (3). But we do find interesting lessons in other examples of insincere uses of slurs. Consider the following.

(4) Li is a Ch*nk.

Context: Sally knows that Li is Chinese but holds no negative feelings towards Chinese people. She is trying to deceive Henry, her racist friend, about her having a negative attitude towards Chinese people.

Intuitively, Sally does not lie—she does not lie about having a derogatory attitude towards Chinese people or anything similar. For the purposes of this short paper, let us assume that Sally lies with (3b), but she does not lie with (4).³ This asymmetric lie judgment between (3b) and (4) has deep implications for the pragmatics and semantics of slurs. Or, at least, so I will argue.

I proceed in three steps. First, I briefly present the orthodoxy theory of lying (§2). Next, I argue that many views of the semantics and pragmatics of slurs struggle to account for our asymmetric judgment of lying (§3). I conclude with an application of this style of argument to the semantics and pragmatics of evaluatively thick terms more generally (§4). Whether or not these arguments are convincing, a general, methodological lesson should be drawn from this discussion: When investigating the semantics and pragmatics of a given domain of discourse, looking to judgments of lying is philosophically fruitful.

2 Lying, the Basics

Lying contrasts with merely misleading, misleading without lying. Where liars assert disbelieved information, mere misleaders only non-assertively convey such information. The following example highlights this distinction.

²Although I believe that these clear judgments extend to uses of non-canonical slurs, for simplicity I will set such slurs to the side. Following Jeshion (2021), non-canonical slurs include descriptive slurs (e.g., ‘curry muncher’), gendered slurs (e.g., ‘slut’) and stereotyping expressions (e.g., ‘Uncle Tom’).

³Those I have informally surveyed report a similar intuition. In future work, I focus on whether this and related intuitions are sufficiently backed by folk-judgements. For those who have a strong intuition otherwise, interesting lessons for the semantics and pragmatics of slurs are still available. Just not the lessons I draw in this paper.

Son: A terminally ill cancer patient asks Sally, his doctor, whether his son is doing well. Sally saw the patient's son yesterday, and he was fine. But Sally knows that the son died in a car crash soon after that meeting. Trying to protect her patient from the information that his son has passed, Sally could respond with:

Lie. Your son is fine.

Mislead. I saw him yesterday and he was fine. (Viebahn 2021: 289)

Sally asserts disbelieved information with her first response and therefore lies. With her second, she asserts information she believes to be true while conversationally implicating information she believes to be false – e.g., that the son is fine now. She therefore does not lie but rather merely misleads.

The lying-misleading distinction puts great explanatory weight on how we should understand assertion. This is the subject of an active debate in the lying literature. Still, a tentative orthodoxy has emerged about the *desiderata* all accounts should capture: Speakers can *lie* about what they conventionally implicate and presuppose in addition to what they literally and directly say. Therefore, speakers can *assert* what they conventionally implicate and presuppose in addition to what they literally and directly say – at least in the sense of assertion relevant to lying.

First, focusing on conventional implicatures, consider Sally's response of (5) to Henry's question of whether any Arkansan has won the Tour de France.

- (5) Lance Armstrong, an Arkansan, won the 2003 Tour de France.

Context: Sally knows that Armstrong won in 2003 and that Armstrong is from Texas. She is trying to deceive Henry about Armstrong being an Arkansan. (Stokke 2017: §6)

Following Potts (2004), supplemental relatives – such as the non-restrictive relative clause 'an Arkansan' – trigger conventional implicatures; in this case, that Lance Armstrong is an Arkansan. Also, following Potts, conventional implicatures are asserted.⁴ Because Sally knows that Armstrong is from Texas and not Arkansas, Sally lies with her conventional implicature (for agreement, see Sorensen (2017), Stokke (2017), Stokke (2018), Viebahn (2019), Gaszczyk (2022) and García-Carpintero (2023)).

Moving to presuppositional lies, consider Sally's asking Henry:

⁴Although Sally performs two assertions in uttering (5), these assertions are not on par. Her *secondary assertion* that Armstrong is an Arkansan functions as a supplement to – or comment on – the *primary assertion* that he won the 2003 Tour de France.

(6) Do you know that John owns a Ferrari?

Context: Sally knows that John does not own a Ferrari. She is trying to deceive Henry about John owning a Ferrari. (Viebahn (2019): 735)

Intuitively, Sally lies about John owning a Ferrari. As this proposition is presupposed, speakers can lie with presuppositions. This conclusion is more contentious than in the case of conventional implicatures, but there are compelling theoretical arguments and significant empirical support for the possibility of presuppositional lies.⁵ Despite being an open matter, I will follow the dominant view in the lying literature and assume that speakers can lie by presupposing disbelieved information.

3 Lying and the Semantics of Slurs

Slurs are offensive words. Although derogatory uses of ‘ki*e’ and ‘Jew’ in the mouth of an anti-semitic both warrant offense, only the former appears to come ‘pre-packaged’ with derogation. Many locate this difference between slurs and their neutral counterparts in the *conventionally triggered information* of slurring terms, where conventionally triggered information includes truth-conditions, conventional implicatures and presuppositions.

As I argue below, our asymmetric lie judgment – that (3b) is a lie and (4) is not – tells in favor of views on which slurring statements only conventionally trigger true propositions when used for members of the slurred group. Let’s investigate why by looking at four broad families of views regarding the conventionally triggered information of slurs.

To introduce them, consider a situation where Sally utters the following.

(7) Henry is a ki*e.

Context: Henry is Jewish.

According to the first family of views – which we can call *Purely Expressive views* – (7) does not conventionally trigger any information. This is because slurring statements are purely expressive, similar to ‘Ouch’ and ‘Oops’. Uses of expressives can be correct or incorrect and sincere or insincere, but not true or false. This view is advanced by Hedger (2012) and Hedger (2013).

Pure Expressive views stumble in accounting for our lie judgment of (3b). There, Sally lies. Therefore, she asserts something that she believes to be false. But on this view, nothing is asserted, let alone both asserted and believed to be false.

⁵For agreement, see Viebahn (2019), Viebahn et al. (2020), Reins and Wiegmann (2021), Gaszczyk (2022) and García-Carpintero (2023). Stokke (2024), in defence of the orthodox view that speakers do not assert what they presuppose, rejects this possibility.

On the second family of views – which we can call *No Extension views* – (7) only has false conventionally triggered information. Slurring statements only function to misrepresent their target by predicating properties that nobody instantiates. As an example, (7) ascribes the property of *being contemptible because they are Jewish* to Henry. Because nobody is contemptible because of their race, simple slurring statements like (7) are never true. This view is advanced by Hom (2008) and Hom and May (2018), among others.

On No Extension views, when Sally says, ‘Zachary is a Ch*nk,’ she asserts that (e.g.) Zachary is contemptible because he is Chinese. As Sally knows that Zachary is Irish, she asserts disbelieved information. Therefore, she lies in (3b). It is (4) that causes trouble for this family of views. No Extension views entail that Sally asserts that (e.g.,) Li is contemptible because he is Chinese. Although Sally knows that Li is Chinese, she also knows that nobody, including Li, is contemptible because of their race. Therefore, Sally is incorrectly classified as lying, and our asymmetry goes unaccounted for.

The third family of views – which we can call *Same Extension views* – understand (7) only to have true conventionally triggered information. This view is advanced by Anderson and Lepore (2013), Jeshion (2013) and Bolinger (2017). The conventionally triggered information of (7) is identical to the information triggered when we replace the slur with its neutral counterpart. More concretely, (7) triggers the same information as (8).

(8) Henry is Jewish.

Only Same Extension views capture our asymmetry. In (3b), Sally asserts that Zachary is Chinese while knowing him to be Irish. Therefore, she lies. In (4), Sally asserts that Li is Chinese, which she knows to be true. She therefore does not lie.

The last family of views – which we can call *Two Content views* – draw from the second and third. Slurring statements such as (7) conventionally trigger two contents, one true and the other false. On the dominant iterations of this view, slurring statements carry derogatory presuppositions or conventional implicatures.⁶ On these views, a speaker who utters (7) asserts both that Henry is Jewish and that (e.g.,) he is contemptible in virtue of being Jewish. This first proposition is true, and the second proposition, conveyed by either a conventional implicature or presupposition, is false.

Two Content views capture the first judgment in our asymmetry but not the second. With (3b), Sally asserts that Zachary is Chinese and is contemptible because of it. As

⁶See Cepollaro and Stojanovic (2016) for a presuppositions view. See Williamson (2009) and Bach (2018) for conventional implicature views. Although Kent Bach would not endorse that one of the propositions expressed is a conventional implicature – see Bach (1999) for his general skepticism of that semantic category – the differences between his and Williamson’s view are not relevant to the purposes of this paper.

Sally knows both propositions are false, she is correctly classified as lying. Where we find trouble is, again, in (4). There, Sally asserts that Li is Chinese, which she knows to be true, but she also asserts as (e.g.,) a conventional implicature or presupposition that Li is contemptible because he is Chinese, which she knows is false. As speakers can lie with conventional implicatures and presuppositions, we fail to capture our asymmetry; Sally lies in (4).⁷

There are many views in the literature on the semantics and pragmatics of slurs, only a few of which I mention above. Still, all views fall into one of these four broad categories. As I argued above, only Same Extension views – views on which (7) and (8) conventionally trigger the same information – can capture the asymmetric lie judgment in (3b) and (4).

4 Conclusion

Slurs are derogatory words. But the connection between slurs and their derogatory contents is not by way of truth-conditions, conventional implicatures, or presuppositions. This is because speakers lie with slurring statements only when they believe that the slurred individual does not fall within the extension of the neutral counterpart. As I've argued, this conflicts with the predicted judgments of a wide range of views. Any view on which (7) and (8) conventionally trigger different information will fail to capture our asymmetric lie judgment. This leaves only Same Extension views. If we wish to retain a connection between slurs and derogatory information, it must be through some other mechanism than conventional triggers.

One option, embraced by *hybrid-expressivists*, is to treat slurs as having an expressive derogatory content in addition to a neutral truth-conditional one (see, among others, Jeshion 2013 and 2018). Statements containing slurs and statements with their neutral counterparts overlap in their truth-conditional information but diverge in expressive content. According to the dominant assertion-based views in the lying literature, speakers cannot lie with expressives (for agreement, see Davis (2005): 142, Stokke (2018): 202 and Lewis (2020): 372). So, at least according to this dominant view, hybrid-expressivist theories of slurs respect our asymmetric lie judgment.⁸

⁷As pointed out by an anonymous referee, this argument against treating the derogatory information of slurs as conventional implicatures is a bit delicate. One might argue that slurs, unlike unrestrictive relative clauses, generate non-asserted conventional implicatures. One way this could go is by making use of Potts (2004)'s distinction between supplemental and expressive conventional implicatures paired with the assumption that expressive conventional implicatures are not asserted. Here is not the place to develop such a view, but I will offer an all too brief response: This seems to result in simply a Same Extension view, namely hybrid-expressivism.

⁸A slight complication. In other work, I push back on this dominant view and argue that speakers can lie with expressives (see Haas 2024b and 2024a). Still, the theory of lying that I develop in those works does not entail that speakers lie with slurs even if slurs should be treated

Another option, embraced by *pragmatic theories*, is that derogatory contents are conveyed via purely pragmatic mechanisms. According to Bolinger (2017), a speaker's contrastive preference in using the slur over its neutral counterpart signals that the speaker endorses a cluster of derogatory attitudes towards the slurred group. Alternatively, Nunberg (2018) argues that using a slur conversationally implicates that the speaker affiliates with those who have a derogatory attitude towards the slurred group. As the information conveyed via these pragmatic mechanisms does not amount to assertions – at least in the sense relevant to lying – pragmatic theories of slurs capture our starting asymmetry.⁹

This style of argument does not only apply to slurs. It has important implications for evaluative language more generally. Illustrating this, consider utterances of thick evaluative terms such as 'lewd.'

(9) Sam is wearing a lewd outfit.

Context: Sally knows that Sam is modestly dressed. She utters (9) in an attempt to deceive Henry, her puritanical friend, about Sam being dressed in an overtly sexual manner.

Sally lies to Henry about Sam being dressed in an overtly sexual manner. As for slurs, little of interest to the semantics and pragmatics of evaluative language follows from this first lie judgment. Where we do find important lessons for evaluative language is in a second example.

(10) James is wearing a lewd outfit.

Context: Sally knows that James is wearing an overtly sexual outfit but holds no negative attitude towards sexual overtness. She utters (10) in an attempt to deceive Henry, her puritanical friend, about her having a negative attitude towards sexual overtness.

Plausibly, Sally does not lie with (10) – she does not lie about having a negative attitude towards sexual overtness or anything similar. Again, this asymmetric judgment is important for the conventionally triggered information of thick evaluative language. Any theory of such language that entails 'lewd' and 'sexually overt' conventionally triggers different information – either at the level of truth-conditions, conventional implicatures, or presuppositions – cannot capture the asymmetric judgment between (9) and (10).

as partly expressive.

⁹There is a growing empirical literature that suggests speakers can lie with some conversational implicatures; see, for example, Wiegmann et al. 2021. If this is right, then conversational implicature accounts of the derogatory content of slurs, such as the one advanced in Nunberg 2018, might fail to secure our starting asymmetry.

Just as for slurs, the evaluative information of thick evaluative terms must be conveyed through some mechanism other than conventional triggers.¹⁰

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