

Slurs and the Type-Token Distinction of Their Derogatory Force

Chang Liu

Department of Philosophy and Religious Studies, Peking University
ch.liu@live.com

Abstract Slurs are derogatory, and theories of slurs aim at explaining their “derogatory force”. This paper draws a distinction between the type derogatory force and the token derogatory force of slurs. To explain the type derogatory force is to explain why a slur is a derogatory word. By contrast, to explain the token derogatory force is to explain why an utterance of a slur is derogatory. This distinction will be defended by examples in which the type and the token derogatory force come apart. Because of the distinction, an adequate theory of slurs must be plausible for both the type and the token derogatory force. However, I will argue that many theories fail to be plausible for both. In particular, Hom’s combinatorial externalism and the conventional implicature theory offer implausible accounts of the token derogatory force, whereas the prohibitionist theory is insufficient to explain the type derogatory force.

Keywords: Slurs, Pejoratives, Derogatory Force, Offensiveness, Type-token Distinction

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0. Introduction^{1,2}

Slurs are derogatory words and they are used in derogatory speeches to humiliate and subjugate certain groups of people. However, the way they are derogatory, or their ‘derogatory force’, appears puzzling. For instance, the N-word, a racial slur for black people, is perhaps the most heinous word in English and the most controversial word in contemporary politics. As Randall Kennedy (2003) has observed, this slur has been widely used as an insult in many aspects of American society, including poetry, music, jokes, political speeches, and discriminations in daily life. Nevertheless, Kennedy has documented many uses other than insults and derogation; the N-word has also been used, within the black community, for making jokes by comedians, showing affection among friends, spurring actions by black nationalists, and even showing camaraderie

¹ Warning: This paper contains examples of offensive language. I apologize in advance for any potential offense this could cause.

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from common experiences of discriminations. The derogatory force of slurs remains a puzzle because of these complexities.

Explaining the derogatory force (also called ‘offensiveness’) of slurs is one of the central tasks for theories of slurs. This complex feature of slurs gives rise to many philosophical questions. Why is “chink” derogatory, whereas its neutral counterpart “Chinese” is not? Is it derogatory because of semantic contents (Hom 2010, 2012, 2008, Hom and May 2013), conventional implicatures (Whiting 2013), presuppositions (Schlenker 2007), or the prohibition on it (Anderson and Lepore 2013)? Furthermore, theories of slurs have to explain features related to derogatory force such as *non-displaceability*, *derogatory force variation*, etc.

I will draw a distinction between the *type derogatory force* and the *token derogatory force* of slurs. I believe that theories of slurs conflate two things together under the label ‘derogatory force’. Take the slur “chink” for instance. There are two distinct things to be explained. First, a theory can explain why the word “chink” is a derogatory word. This is to explain what I call the ‘type derogatory force’ of slurs. Second, a theory can explain why a particular utterance of “chink,” e.g., someone’s assertion that “Chinks celebrate Lunar New Year” is derogatory³. This is to explain the ‘token derogatory force’ of utterances of slurs. Notice that the type derogatory force is a feature of the type of a word, whereas the token derogatory force is a feature of utterances.

Type Derogatory Force: A slur has the type derogatory force when it is a derogatory word.

Token Derogatory Force: An utterance of a slur has the token derogatory force when it is a derogatory utterance.

In *section 1*, I will first defend this distinction with examples in which the token derogatory force deviates from the type derogatory force. For instance, a slur against a particular group can be used in non-derogatory utterances and it can be used to derogate people other than that group. Because of this distinction, an adequate theory of slurs must be plausible for both the type and the token derogatory force. I will respond to objections against this requirement.

From *section 2* to *section 4*, I will prove that many theories of slurs fail to be satisfactory for both the type and the token derogatory force. *Section 2* will show that Hom’s combinatorial externalism faces difficulties in explaining the token derogatory force. It cannot explain why uttering slurs in non-assertion can be derogatory and how slurs can be used in non-derogatory utterances. *Section 3* will present objections against the conventional implicature theory’s account of the token derogatory force. It cannot accommodate the possibilities of non-derogatory utterances of slurs and using slurs to derogate the groups other than their referents. *Section 4* will argue that the prohibitionist theory is insufficient to explain the type derogatory force; prohibitions are not fine-grained enough to explain why slurs are derogatory words *against* their referents. *Section 5* will conclude this paper.

1. Defending the Type-Token Distinction of the Derogatory Force of Slurs

In this section, I will clarify the type-token distinction of the derogatory force and then defend it. I will argue that this distinction gives rise to a requirement for theories of

³ I shall use ‘an utterance of a slur’ as a shorthand way of saying ‘an utterance of a sentence that contains a slur’.

slurs: an adequate theory must offer plausible accounts for both the type and the token derogatory force.

Before defending the type-token distinction, my usage of ‘type’ and ‘token’ needs to be clarified. In general, “type” refers to the general sort of a thing, while “token” refers to the particular instances of it⁴. Nevertheless, different fields of philosophy have applied these two terms to different things. For instance, philosophers of mind draw a distinction between type and token identity theories. While type identity theorists like Smart (1959) might identify the type of a mental state (e.g., pain) with the type of a physical state (e.g., c-fibre firing), token identity theorists like Davidson (1970) only identify tokens of mental states with tokens of physical states. Moreover, aestheticians need to draw the distinction between the types of works (e.g., Beethoven’s Symphony No. 5) and tokens of them (e.g., particular performances of the Symphony) (Wollheim 1968). Finally, philosophers of language distinguish the ‘types’ of linguistic expressions from their ‘tokens’. Suppose two speakers utter “Chang is Chinese” simultaneously. They have produced two tokens of the word “Chinese” of the same type.

My use of ‘type derogatory force’ and ‘token derogatory force’ follows this common usage in philosophy of language. By ‘type derogatory force’, I mean *a property of the type* of a slur, i.e., the word’s being a derogatory word. In dictionaries, derogatory words are often labeled as “derogatory” or “offensive.” By “token derogatory force,” I refer to *a property of a token* (i.e., particular uses or utterances) of a slur. Suppose a speaker uses a slur in making an utterance. This utterance has the “token derogatory force” when it is a derogatory utterance.

After these clarifications, I will defend the distinction between the type and the token derogatory force of slurs. We can find at least two kinds of possibilities in which the token derogatory force deviates from the type derogatory force.

First, an utterance of a slur can be (token) non-derogatory, even if the slur itself remains a (type) derogatory word. This usually happens when the speaker deliberately abuses slurs, instead of using them in literal ways. Close friends can address each other with slurs to show intimacy. Comedians use slurs to make jokes. Activists can use racial slurs to show pride in their identity. Despite derogatory words being used, their utterances are not derogatory because they are not derogating anyone. Consider the following two utterances of the same sentence.

Derogatory and Non-Derogatory Utterances of Slurs

- 1) “Chinks are coming!” (chanted by Chinese activists in a political rally against racism).
- 2) “Chinks are coming!” (said by a white supremacist in a speech against Chinese immigrants)

In both utterances, “chink” retains its type derogatory force. By contrast, the token derogatory force is lost in utterance 1, while utterances 2 has the token derogatory force. Unlike utterance 2, utterance 1 is not derogatory, even if it involves uttering the derogatory word “chink”. It follows that the type derogatory force of “chink” must be something different from the token derogatory force of utterances of “chink.”

Why is utterance 1 non-derogatory? The point of utterance 1 is to challenge racism by deliberately abusing slurs, the linguistic tools of oppressors. It is a rebellious gesture showing the solidarity of activists who are unafraid of the derogatory language imposed on them. Whatever their message is, utterance 1 is totally different from utterance 2, in

⁴ There is also a debate over the metaphysical nature of types (e.g., are types sets, kinds, or general laws?). I will set this aside since my distinction does not depend on a specific theory of types.

which slurs are used in a literal way for derogation. If utterance 1 were derogatory like utterance 2, the activists would be derogating themselves.

My claim that “chink” retains its type derogatory force in both utterances might be challenged. It might be argued that “chink” loses its type derogatory force in utterance 1 because it has been reappropriated by those Chinese activists. Therefore, it ceases to be a derogatory word. However, I believe this case of abusing slurs is distinct from reappropriating slurs because it does not involve a change in meaning. A slur such as “queer” is reappropriated when it has acquired a new meaning that does not give rise to the type derogatory force. By contrast, my example of abusing “chink” is a pragmatic phenomenon that requires no change in meaning; it is unlikely that an occasional abuse of a slur changes what “chink” means in English.

Second, slurs can be used in utterances to derogate people other than their (semantic) referents. Consider the possibility of racists calling Koreans “chinks”:

Derogating the Group Other Than the Referent

- 3) “Chinks are moving into our neighborhood.” (A racist commenting on his new Korean neighbors, even though he knows that they are Korean)

The token derogatory force again deviates from the type derogatory force. The word “chink” does not have the type derogatory force against Koreans. After all, it is a derogatory word against the Chinese, its referent. However, utterance 3 has the token derogatory force against the Korean neighbors, even if “chink” is not a derogatory word against Koreans. Perhaps the speaker is implying the Korean neighbors are despicable like “chinks.” Because this utterance is derogatory against them, the Korean neighbors have a legitimate reason to feel hurt and to protest it. The racist speaker cannot excuse himself by pointing out that he uttered a slur against the Chinese, therefore it has nothing to do with Koreans.

The distinction between the type and token derogatory force gives rise to a theoretical requirement for theories of slurs; *an adequate theory must be plausible for both of them*. For instance, a theory that succeeds at explaining the type derogatory force but leads to an implausible account of the token derogatory force is inadequate. Theories have to satisfy this requirement because they must accommodate the intuitions labeled under ‘derogatory force’ and these intuitions are divided between the type and token derogatory force. For example, it is intuitive that utterance 1 is not a derogatory utterance. If a theory entailed that utterance 1 is derogatory, we would not take it to be an adequate theory for the token derogatory force.

I will defend this requirement by addressing two objections against it.

First, it might be argued that the requirement is trivial because a plausible account of the type derogatory force also accounts for the token derogatory force. This is because the ‘token derogatory force’ is no more than a by-product derived from the type derogatory force. Utterances of slurs are derogatory simply because slurs are derogatory words. Therefore, once a theory has explained the type derogatory force, the explanation of ‘token derogatory force’ comes for free.

However, I believe that a plausible account of the type derogatory force does not account for the token derogatory force by itself. This is because the token derogatory force behaves differently from the type derogatory force. The type derogatory force of a slur is stable, whereas its token derogatory force is flexible. Take “chink” for instance. No matter what sentence it is embedded into and what speech act it is used to perform, it is always a derogatory word, a derogatory word against the Chinese. It remains a derogatory word unless there is a change in English. By contrast, whether an utterance of “chink” is derogatory depends on contextual factors such as intentions, situations, *etc.*

Not all utterances of “chink” are derogatory and not all of them are derogatory against the Chinese. Consequently, it is not true that utterances of “chink” are derogatory simply because “chink” is a derogatory word. If this were the case, every utterance of “chink” would be derogatory and derogatory against the Chinese, because “chink” is always a derogatory word.

Second, one might argue that even if the token derogatory force of slur needs to be explained, it does not need to be explained by theories of slurs. The proper aim of theories of slurs is to study the types of slurs and the unique features of the types. Explaining why utterances of slurs are derogatory is the job of pragmatics. If you take semantics to be the study of the standing meanings of types of linguistic expressions, theories of slurs fall on the semantic side of the semantic-pragmatic boundary. The token derogatory force should be left to the other side for pragmatics.

My response is that token derogatory force cannot be ignored because theories of slurs have implications on them. Adopting an account of the type derogatory force compels a theory to endorse certain accounts of the token derogatory force, sometimes absurd accounts. For instance, if you think “chink” is a derogatory word because it means «should be discriminated...because of being Chinese...» (Hom 2008: 431), you are committed to explaining the token derogatory force of uttering “chink” in terms of communicating this derogatory content. If you think “chink” is a derogatory word because it is prohibited (Anderson and Lepore 2013), you are committed to holding that uttering “chink” is (token) derogatory because it violates the prohibition. Unfortunately, a theory’s account of the type derogatory force often entails problematic accounts of the token derogatory force. I will show this in the following sections. Even if a theory chooses to remain silent about the token derogatory force, it needs to make sure it does not entail implausible explanations of the token derogatory force.

I have introduced and defended the distinction between the type and the token derogatory force. This distinction is not respected by every theory. The following sections will present objections against Hom’s combinatorial externalism, the conventional implicature theory, and the prohibitionist theory. If these objections are successful, these three theories fail to be plausible for both the type and the token derogatory force.

2. Hom’s Combinatorial Externalism

Hom’s combinatorial externalism explains the type derogatory force in terms of truth-conditional semantic content (Hom 2008). Slurs are derogatory words because of their derogatory semantic content⁵. The semantic contents of slurs are complex normative properties like «ought to be subject to such-and-such discriminatory practices for having such-and-such stereotypical properties all because of belonging to such-and-such groups» (Hom 2010: 394). For instance, “chink” is not synonymous with “Chinese,” the semantic content of which is simply the property of being Chinese. For Hom (2012: 394), “chink” means «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

⁵ The term ‘semantic content’ is ambiguous, depending on one’s conception of semantics. It is possible for a theory of slurs to posit non-truth-conditional semantic contents of slurs. In *Slurs and Register: A Case Study in Meaning Pluralism* (Diaz-Legaspe, Liu and Stainton 2019), we argue that slurs have an use-meaning, which is the use to speak in a derogatory register. A register is a way of speaking in particular situations (e.g., ‘tummy’ is a word used in childish talks). However, I will limit the term ‘semantic contents’ to mean ‘truth-conditional contents’ in this paper.

being Chinese.» Consequently, “Chang is a chink” is false and “Chang is not a chink” is true, even if Chang is Chinese. This is because no one is a chink, who should be discriminated against because of being Chinese (Hom and May 2013).

Combinatorial externalism extends its explanation of type derogatory force to explain the token derogatory force. Slurs are derogatory words because they express derogatory semantic contents. Consequently, utterances of slurs are derogatory if and only if the semantic content of slurs are predicated to someone (Hom 2012: 397, Hom 2008: 432). Asserting that “Chang is a chink” is derogatory because it asserts that Chang ought to be discriminated in such-and-such ways... because of being Chinese (Hom 2008: 432).

However, I will present two objections to prove that this theory fails at explaining the token derogatory force.

First, combinatorial externalism fails to explain the token derogatory force of non-assertion utterances. Asking questions and issuing commands with slurs can be as derogatory as assertions. Consider the following utterances⁶:

Derogatory Non-assertions of Slurs

- 4) “Are there any chinks?” (Asked by a white supremacist who is worried about the presence of the Chinese in a neighborhood)
- 5) “Get the chinks out!” (A white supremacist urging a mob of people who are going to drive the Chinese out of the neighborhood)

Despite their apparent token derogatory force, Hom’s combinatorial externalism cannot allow these two utterances to be derogatory. This is because utterances of slurs are derogatory only if their derogatory contents are predicated to someone. However, the speakers are not claiming that some people are chinks in the question and the command.

Second, combinatorial externalism has difficulties in accommodating non-derogatory utterances of slurs⁷. Consider again utterance 1 and utterance 2:

- 1) “Chinks are coming!” (chanted by Chinese activists in a political rally against racism).
- 2) “Chinks are coming!” (said by a white supremacist in a speech against Chinese immigrants)

Although utterance 1 does not have the token derogatory force, combinatorial externalism entails that utterance 1 and utterance 2 should be derogatory exactly in the same way. For Hom, to derogate someone with a slur is to predicate the semantic content of the slur on him. In both utterances, the speakers assert that there are chinks, i.e., people who ought to be discriminated against in such-and-such ways...because of being Chinese. Therefore, both utterances should be derogatory exactly in the same way. The Chinese activists are derogating the Chinese just like the white supremacists. Again,

⁶ There are many horrifying real-life examples of slurs in derogatory commands or questions. For example, Richard Wright (1993: 12-13) writes about his experience as a hall boy defending a black hotel maid, who was assaulted by a white watchman. The watchman took out his gun and asked Wright «N**ger, don't you like it?». However, I will use the following hypothetical examples more than real examples in order to minimize potential harm.

⁷ There are also real-life examples of non-derogatory utterances of slurs. Take rap music for instance. Many black rappers use the N-word among themselves in a non-derogatory way. For instance, Tupac Shakur, in his song *Words of Wisdom*, claims that the N-word «means Never Ignorant Getting Goals Accomplished» to him (Kennedy 2003: 36).

this is very counterintuitive. Hom's theory should allow slurs to be used in non-derogatory utterances.

Hom's implausible account of the token derogatory force is a consequence of his account of the type derogatory force. He believes that slurs are derogatory words because of their derogatory semantic contents. To be consistent with this, he is forced to explain the token derogatory force also in terms of derogatory semantic contents. This is how he arrives at an implausible account of the token derogatory force. This also reinforces my response to the objection in section 1. That is, theories of slurs cannot explain only the type derogatory force, because this explanation can have unwanted theoretical consequences on the token derogatory force.

3. The Conventional Implicature Theory

The conventional implicature theory accounts for the token derogatory force in terms of conventional implicatures. Utterances of slurs are derogatory because they conventionally implicate derogatory contents (Whiting 2013: 364, Williamson 2009: 149). For instance, what is said by "Chang is a chink" and "Chang is a Chinese" are the same. Both utterances have the same truth condition but differ in conventional implicatures. Uttering "Chang is a chink" conventionally implicates a derogatory content such as negative attitudes toward the Chinese.

The conventional implicature theory itself is not an account of the type derogatory force; it says nothing about why slurs are derogatory words. This is because conventional implicature is a part of what a speaker means by (token) utterances, rather than something that belongs to the types of the expressions. Consequently, an explanation by conventional implicature can only be an account of why utterances are derogatory. However, the conventional implicature theory could extend itself to explain the type derogatory force. It could take slurs to have certain conventional meanings that determine the conventional implicatures. Slurs are derogatory words because they carry such conventional meanings.

Nevertheless, I will argue that the conventional implicature theory does not have a satisfactory explanation for the token derogatory force. I will raise two objections.

First, the conventional implicature theory has difficulties in accommodating non-derogatory utterances of slurs. Consider again the example of utterance 1 and utterance 2. Although "chink" is a derogatory word, "chinks are coming!" chanted by Chinese activists to protest racism is not a derogatory utterance. Nonetheless, it follows from the conventional implicature theory that there cannot be any difference in terms of token derogatory force between utterance 1 and utterance 2. Utterance 1 is as derogatory as utterances 2 because, in both utterances, the speaker conventionally implicates his negative attitude toward the Chinese by using the word "chink."

Second, the conventional implicature theory also cannot accommodate the possibility that a slur is uttered to derogate a group other than its referent. Recall the example of utterance 3, in which the speaker calls his Korean neighbors "chinks." The conventional implicature theory cannot allow an utterance of "chink" to have the token derogatory force against Koreans. This is because what is conventionally implicated by uttering "chink" is the negative attitudes toward the Chinese. Therefore utterance 3 can be derogatory only against the Chinese, not Koreans.

Why does the conventional implicature theory fail to provide an adequate answer to the token question? This is because conventional implicature is determined by the conventional meanings of linguistic expressions (Grice 1989: 25). Therefore, it lacks the flexibility of the token derogatory force of utterances. It follows from the conventional implicature theory that every utterance of "chink" must be derogatory against the

Chinese. This is because every utterance of “chink” carries the same derogatory conventional implicature against the Chinese, which is determined by the conventional meaning of “chink.”

4. The Prohibitionist Theory

My final target is the prohibitionist theory, which explains the token derogatory force in terms of prohibitions (Anderson and Lepore 2013). Slurs are prohibited words. They are not allowed to be used in many occasions. The offensiveness (or derogatory force) of slurs is a consequence of prohibition; uses of slurs are offensive because slurs are prohibited words. Using slurs violates the prohibition on them, and therefore it is offensive.

However, the prohibitionist theory is insufficient for explaining the type derogatory force of slurs. It has been accused of insufficiency to explain the difference between the ‘offensive character’ (or derogatory force) of slurs and general pejoratives (Anderson and Lepore 2013: 355). For instance, the word “chink” is offensive in a way different from how “asshole” is offensive, even though they are both prohibited words. Therefore prohibition alone is insufficient for explaining the difference. Anderson and Lepore respond to this accusation by denying such a difference; there is no evidence to prove that both words are offensive in different ways. They insist that there is no difference in the reaction among hearers. Even if we are more offended by slurs, this is because they are more prohibited.

I will argue that Anderson and Lepore’s reply fails because it conflates the type derogatory force with the token derogatory force. Grant that utterances of slurs and utterances of general pejorative have the same kind of token derogatory force. Uttering “Chang is a chink” and uttering “Chang is an asshole” might be offensive in the same way; they provoke the same feelings, the same reaction among hearers. However, when it comes to the type derogatory force, the similarity between slurs and general pejoratives comes to an end. For instance, “chink” is not merely an offensive word, it is an offensive word *against* a particular group of people. The job of this word is to derogate and humiliate all the Chinese people. This is a feature that general pejoratives lack; they are not offensive words *against* a specific group. The word “asshole” does not target all mean, contemptible persons; its use is to derogate particular individuals. For instance, all Chinese people would have a legitimate reason to feel offended by the sentence “Chang is a chink,” the literal usage of which harms all Chinese people. By contrast, it would be absurd to say all mean, contemptible people should feel offended by the sentence “Chang is an asshole.” After all, the literal usage of this sentence is to derogate only Chang.

Anderson and Lepore might provide prohibitionist explanations for how words can be offensive *against* certain groups of people. There can be two approaches and I will reject both respectively. First, they might hold that an offensive word is offensive against a group because it refers to that group. However, this explanation would not distinguish between slurs and general pejoratives. This is because general pejoratives are not offensive against their referent; “asshole” is not a word to insult all mean and despicable people. Second, they might hold that offensive words are offensive against people who prohibit them. “Chink” is an offensive word against Chinese people because it is prohibited by the Chinese community. However, this alternative explanation does not work because a slur is often prohibited by people who are not the target of it. Many groups of activists prohibit and denounce the word “chink,” even though they are not Chinese. Nonetheless, this does not make “chink” an offensive word against non-Chinese groups.

What makes the prohibitionist theory insufficient to explain the type derogatory force? I believe this is a consequence of conflating the type derogatory force and the token derogatory force. It assumes that an account of the token derogatory force is able to explain both the type and the token derogatory force. Since violations of prohibitions make utterances of slurs offensive, it is tempting to infer that prohibitions also make slurs offensive words. Unfortunately, prohibition is insufficient for the type derogatory force of slurs; it is too coarse-grained to explain why slurs are derogatory words *against* particular groups.

5. Conclusion

In this paper, I have introduced the type-token distinction to distinguish between the type derogatory force and the token derogatory force. That is, explaining why a slur is a derogatory word should be differentiated from explaining why an utterance of a slur is derogatory. I have defended this distinction with an example of “chink” used in a non-derogatory utterance and the example of using “chink” to derogate Koreans. Consequently, theories of slurs must be satisfactory for both the type and the token derogatory force.

Unfortunately, many theories are implausible for either the type or the token derogatory force. Hom’s combinatorial externalism’s account of the token derogatory force is problematic because it does not allow asking “Are there any chinks?” to be derogatory, and it does not allow “Chinks are coming!” to be non-derogatory. The conventional implicature theory also struggles to explain the token derogatory force. For example, it does not allow the possibility of the non-derogatory utterance of “Chinks are coming!” and derogating Koreans by calling them “chinks.” Finally, the prohibitionist theory can hardly explain type derogatory force; it cannot explain why “chink,” unlike general pejoratives, is a derogatory word *against* the Chinese.

The lesson is, I believe, that theories of slurs should respect the type-token distinction. The phenomenon they aim to account for is more complicated than people thought; explaining the so-called ‘derogatory force’ is not a single task but two challenges. Unless theories of slurs stop conflating these two, they will always encounter problems like my objections.

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