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NOT ALL SLURS ARE EQUAL

abstract

Slurs are typically defined as conveying contempt based on group-membership. However, here I argue that they are not a unitary group. First, I describe two dimensions of variation among derogatives: how targets are identified, and how offensive the term is. This supports the typical definition of slurs as opposed to other derogatives. I then highlight problems with this definition, mainly caused by variable offence across slur words. In the process I discuss how major theories of slurs can account for variable offence, and conclude that contempt based on group-membership doesn't cover all the data. I finish by noting that the most offensive slurs are those that target oppressed groups. I claim it is oppression that underpins most offence, and that beyond this offensive property, some slurs are actively used to oppress.

1. Introduction

Slurring is a kind of hate speech. Examples most commonly cited in the literature are those based on race and ethnicity ("nigger", "kike", "chink", "spic", "paki"), gender ("bitch"), and sexual orientation ("dyke", "faggot", "tranny"). Slurs, although pejorative in a broad sense, are commonly deemed to be different from pejorative words ("jerk", "dickhead", "asshole", "wimp"). In addition, there are words that are clearly derogatory ("fatso", "wino", "druggie", "slut", "commie"), but where there is no universal agreement about the category (pejorative or slur) to which they belong. Finally, there are some words with multiple uses, all likely to cause offence, one of which is a slur. The most obvious example is "cunt", which can be used either as a swearword, as a vulgar noun, as a pejorative, or as a slur.

Are slurs different from other derogatives? If slurs are special, what makes them special? In this short paper, I will try to answer this question. I will come to the conclusion that not all words referred to as slurs are special, but that some are. Notably, these are the slurs that are most hotly discussed.

2. Derogatives

Derogative expressions are evaluatives, they express negative attitudes towards the target. Examples include [1] to [6]:

[1] "Faggot!"
[2] "He's a Jew^C!" (C marks contemptuous intonation).
[3] "Filthy fucking Jew!"
[4] "I hate gays."
[5] "You dickhead!"
[6] "Hey fatso!"

All the above are expressions of derogation. What makes them different from one another? There are two dimensions of variation between these examples that will be important for my argument.

The first dimension is in how the target is identified. In (1) the target is identified by membership of a group. This property of derogation based on group-membership is characteristic of the word itself, not a property of its use. To see the difference note that in (2) contempt is expressed, and that contempt clearly arises from group-membership, but

the expression of contempt is by tone. The word "Jew" is perfectly capable of a neutral use.[1] A similar effect to (2) can be achieved by prefacing with expletives as in (3), or by explicitly reporting what attitude one has towards the target, say, hate in (4). All of examples (1)-(4) concern groups. What they have in common is that they express a negative attitude not just towards an individual, but to a group. (4) does this explicitly, but (1)-(3) do this by implication: if I hate you because you are a Jew, by default I can be expected to hate all Jewish people. Note however that though similar slurring effects arise from using a neutral counterpart with contemptuous intonation, or accompanied by expletives as in (2)-(3), they differ substantially from a slur term as in (1) in that only the latter has contempt conventionally attached to the word as based on the target's group-membership. For example, the anti-Semite saying "Kike" shows contempt for Jews precisely because they are Jews. Contempt and group-classification are bound together in a slur term so that one cannot do without the other. Not so in (2)-(3), where contempt is disjoint from the neutral counterpart, deriving instead from external sources to do with the *speaker's own expression of contempt.* Remove the contemptuous intonation or the expletives, and the offence falls out. The offence would still persist even if we were to remove the expletives from "goddamn' fuckin' fags".

On the other hand, (5) targets a particular individual and expresses contempt based on personal qualities of that individual. There is no reasonable sense in which we could say that (5) derogates the group of all dickheads, in the way that (1) derogates all the gay people. Finally, (6) sits in the middle ground between (5) and (1)-(4). If someone is overweight, calling them "fatso" is certainly targeting them as an individual, but it is again by implicitly expressing a negative attitude towards all people who are overweight. In consequence, while there is a coherent movement against "body-shaming", there is no such movement for the protection of "dickheads". There are quite a number of other derogatives that fall in this middle ground. These include "wino", "druggie", "commie", "fatso", "psycho". Like pejoratives targeted at individuals, they identify the targeted individual on the basis of specific properties that s/he has. But like slurs, they express contempt not only about the particular individual but also about other people who have similar features, and so may be identified as part of a group.

The second dimension of variation is in the intensity of the effects achieved. Most notably, different words cause different degrees of offence, and in different patterns. Calling someone a "dickhead" is likely to offend them, and probably any close friends. Calling someone a "nigger" is considered to be much more offensive, and is offensive to any non-racist who hears it. There are also strong differences within the group of words that are group based. For example, as noted by Jeshion (2013), "Nigger" is widely considered to be more offensive than "Spook" and "Chink", which are in turn more offensive than "Limey" and "Yankee". So variation in offence is not just between slurs and other pejoratives, but across slur terms themselves.

So, we have two types of differences we can readily identify between derogative words. First, how the target is identified. Second, how offensive the word is.

On this basis it seems reasonable to follow authors like Jeshion, and say that a slur is defined as a word that is used to express contempt on the basis of group-membership. On that account we would have to allow that the class of derogatives based on properties that many individuals share are at least slur-like. This seems on the face of it a satisfactory explanation of what makes slurs different from individual pejoratives.

But this does not explain offence variation across slur terms. This is the knottier problem. There are variety of ways of dealing with it. I consider these now.

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1 Given its pedigreed history, the neutral term "Jew" has acquired a negative connotation. Similarly, "Indian".

3. Accounting for Variable Derogation

There are several accounts of variable derogation. The ones I will consider are semantic, pragmatic, and prohibitionist.

On a semantic account the variation in offence is a product of the valence of a stereotype encoded by a slur word. This is the sort of position that we would take if we were to follow Chris Hom in his original 2008 paper on slurs. In that paper he argues that a slur semantically encodes a stereotype—i.e. that it predicates a number of negative properties together with a set of deontic prescriptions that are externally derived from practices and institutions of oppression. Thus, the term "Chink" predicates that the target ought to be discriminated for a number of negative stereotypical properties all because of being Chinese. This accounts nicely for variable offence across slur terms. Thus the argument would be that "Nigger" contains a more negative stereotype than "Chink", "Spook", or "Limey". In particular, the pejorative force of a slur word varies given differences in the valence of the semantic content—i.e. the amount of negative properties (and consequently the number of deontic prescription) that a racist institution conventionally encodes into a slur.

This makes sense as far as it goes, but it struggles to account for all the facts. This is because there is a second kind of variation that does not have to do with the words themselves, but with their use. For example, in-group uses may cause no offence. If a gay man refers to a gay friend as a "faggot", and the phrase is clearly uttered without contempt, it may well not be considered offensive. The same is true of African-Americans using the term "Nigger" to refer to one another. But if a white person uses the term to a African-American friend it is much more likely to be considered offensive. This causes problems for a strict semanticist, since if the offence is really encoded in the word it should be the same offence regardless of who uses the word.

This is strongly suggestive that some portion of the offence is carried by pragmatics. One can imagine that an account given in terms of conversational implicature might account for the lack of offence of in-group reclaimed uses. However, it is perfectly possible for a gay speaker to use [1] to derogate another gay target, so this reasoning isn't sound. The fact that a slur is used by in-group members doesn't automatically make it inoffensive. So, even when the causal link between the slur word and the stereotype (along with associated discriminatory practices) is severed on account of the speaker's group-membership, there is still room for the speaker to use the word to express their own contempt. Another route is to claim that there are in fact two words, and this is supported, for example, by the fact that there are two spellings of some words: "Nigger" and "Nigga" with the second being used exclusively to refer in a friendly, in-group context. However, the fact that the second word is not open to use by out-group members suggests that the term is not, in reality a separate word.

What we need to explain is how the word acquires a new convention of use that serves a different purpose for the in-group community. What would that other purpose be? Bianchi (2014) suggests this may be ironic self-deprecation and jokingly self-mockery so as to take the sting out of the ridicule and disdain characteristic from out-group members. This is achieved, she argues, through echoing the derogatory uses by bigots in ways that make manifest their dissociation from the offensive contents. This is clearly a fairly pragmatic matter that is sensitive enough to speaker's intentions such that it leaves room for in-group members to express their own contempt, and hence offend in no dissimilar ways than one would offend with an individual pejorative.

There are other semantic theories of slurring offence. The most notable of these is the work of Jeshion, who argues for an expressivist semantics. The critical part of this view is that it encodes the expression of contempt semantically. This expressivist view has been attacked for not being able to account for variable derogation across words. The argument against is as follows. If the semantic expression of contempt is uniform across all slurs in that a common

core attitude is expressed, then Jeshion's semantics cannot explain variable offence as being caused by variable contempt. Critics claim that this makes it impossible for expressivism to explain variable offence, and thus reject it (Hom 2008).

There are two ways out of this for the expressivist. First, it could be maintained that different words encode varying degrees of contempt, and that it is the degree of contempt expressed that causes the variation in contempt. Jeshion does not propose this, but it seems *prima facie* that there is nothing wrong with this approach. Certainly it seems intuitive to talk about varying degrees of contempt. People regularly use expressions such as "utter contempt", "complete contempt", and "beneath contempt". This suggests that contempt may at least be a property capable of variation, whether or not that can be semantically encoded in words that signal it.

One option for expressivism is to model this variation along similar lines to the variation in the degrees of emotion expressed with ordinary evaluative terms (e.g. "good", "great", "wonderful"). Potts (2007) applies this model to expressive words such as "damn", "hurray". Imagine, for example, someone uttering "Trump is a damn republican". "Damn" signals here a negative shift in the speaker's attitude towards Trump's being a republican. However, if the speaker is a Trump-supporter she might utter "Trump is a damn fine republican" to convey that she has a positive attitude. Thus, what explains the variation is a function shifting the "expressive index" of the conversational context so that an expressive word may be taken to semantically express varying degrees of intensity of the emotion expressed in a context, and how they may differ across contexts. On this model then, using a slur could be treated as updating the common ground with information about the speaker's negative attitudes toward the targeted individual, and toward members of the group as a whole. Thus, different slurs may be conventionally associated with varying degrees of strength of negativity depending on the stereotypes that are drawn upon as the basis for the negative attitudes conventionally expressed.

A second way out, pointed out by Jeshion herself, is through pragmatics. This would provide a different way to handle the issue of variability of offence across uses. Thus, different contexts would modify the contempt expressed semantically. It could be that such a route is complementary to the first, that different words may express variable contempt, and also that this contempt expressed semantically may be further modulated by the context.

However, there is a problem if we ground offence in contempt expression alone. It is that there are many words that can be used to express great contempt, and yet which are not nearly as offensive as slurs. I can call someone the "scum of the earth", but I will not be ostracised by polite society for so doing. This suggests that there really is something else going on than contempt expression, although contempt expression is clearly part of the picture.

This is what leads us to another route, that of prohibitionism. Anderson and Lepore (2013) propose that what makes slurs offensive is that they are prohibited, and that different words are prohibited to different degrees. Prohibitionism neatly accounts for why slurring uses are also offensive, for example, during speech reports. What prohibitionism doesn't neatly account for is why some uses are acceptable, such as the reclaimed uses mentioned above. The argument made is that there are exceptions on the prohibition in certain circumstances, so that the prohibition is lifted for in-group uses. This allows consistency with the data, but at the price of a satisfying explanation.

In fact, the route into explaining why slurs differ so greatly in their offence, while also accounting for their group identifying nature, lies elsewhere.

4. Some slurs are not like others

Consider the slur terms that most deeply offend: "Nigger", "Chink", "Bitch", "Wetback", "Faggot". Now consider this paragraph from the "Five Faces of Oppression" by Iris Young (1990: 42):

> I offer some explication of the concept of oppression as I understand its use by new social movements in the United States since the 1960s. My starting point is reflection on the conditions of the groups said by these movements to be oppressed: among others women, Blacks, Chicanos, Puerto Ricans and other Spanish speaking Americans, American Indians, Jews, lesbians, gay men, Arabs, Asians, old people, working-class people, and the physically and mentally disabled.

Is it coincidence that many of the most offensive slur words are associated with groups we might identify as oppressed? I suggest that it is not. Consider slurs for groups that have been oppressed: "Redskin", "Kike", "Faggot", "Towel-head", "Chink". These number among the most offensive words we have. Then consider the existence of slurs for groups that historically have not been oppressed: "Yankees", "Brits", "Bosch", "Ivan". There are also numerous derogatives for the rich and powerful: "toff", "Hooray Henry", "toffee nose", "upper class twit", "filthy rich". Yet despite conveying considerable contempt these words are, frankly, mildly offensive at best. Neither are they prohibited. Why is that? My suggestion is that it is socially acceptable to slur the powerful, precisely because they are powerful, and it does them no harm.

The evidence thus points to a differentiation between words on the basis of oppression. Slurs are not a unitary group of words on the basis of group membership. There are a variety of slurs, and only some of them are deeply offensive. The common pattern is that words that we prohibit are words that refer to the oppressed. Thus, my claim is that not all slurs are equal. Some slurs refer to oppressed groups, and some do not. The first are broadly considered offensive, and the second are not, or at least to a lesser degree. It is oppression that is the fuel of deep offence.

In one sense this is not yet new; most slurs are written about in the literature precisely because they are words used to target oppressed groups. But by focusing on slurs that target oppressed groups we ignore that many slur terms do not. Highlighting this should change how we delineate between slurs and other derogative terms.

But there is some subtlety required here. First of all, there are many words that do refer to groups we should objectively identify as oppressed, but which, at the current time, are seen by many in polite society as acceptable to use. Thus, take words such as "wrinkly', "old fart", "coffin dodger", "kev", "chav", and so on. These words also target oppressed groups, those who are marginalised or exploited. Yet many who would find racial slurs offensive, do not find these words offensive. This needs to be explained. It may be that, unfortunately, the degree of oppression suffered by these groups is considered by polite society to be acceptable. If this were the case, then the degree of offence is related to the degree to which oppression is seen as being socially unacceptable. This is a complex phenomenon, which will require unpacking.

There is another consequence of this division into words that target oppressed groups, and words that target non-oppressed groups. It is that the former group of words do not just seek to describe oppression, they seek to actively create it and maintain it. Thus, some slurs are part of the mechanism of oppression. They are actively part of the process of oppressing other groups. To see this we need only consider the way that slur terms and hate speech are being used in contemporary political discourse. Specifically, if we consider contemporary events

in politics[2], slurs, and derogatives more generally, are being used as tools for incitement to persuade one group that sees itself as disempowered to gain power by oppressing another. Scapegoating and hate speech are used to silence others by fear, and as ways of emotionally appealing to would-be bigots to join the side of the bigot. For example, Trump supporters have been quoted as referring to Muslims as "Muzzies" and "Mo-slimes". A journalist noting this, who happened to be Jewish, received messages such as "Milbank is an anti-white parasite and a bigoted kike supremacist" (Milbank 2015). This journalist also records attendees at an event assault a Black Lives Matter protester while shouting "Light the motherfucker on fire", and shouting to Latinos "motherfucking tacos—go back to Mexico". This highlights that the purpose of slurs is not one merely of derogation, but one of oppression. Slurs unleash a propensity for violence, create fear in their targets, and make it more permissible for others to give voice to their bigotry to the extent that it is treated as acceptable by political leaders. This ability to incite to action is discussed by Tirrell (2012), who argues that "deeply derogative terms" are words that serve not only to enjoin others to hatred but also to action. In the Rwanda genocide dehumanising slurs have actively served as "action-engendering" and have thus been "part and parcel of genocide, not only an antecedent of it". They motivated Hutu to action by depriving Tutsi of their humanity: by labelling them as "inyenzi" (cockroach) or "inzoka" (snake), this granted permission to hate and a mandate to kill. As Tirrell says (2012: 174), "understanding these speech-acts helps to illuminate the important ways that power is enacted through discourse, how speech-acts can prepare the way for physical and material acts, and how speech generates permissions for actions hitherto uncountenanced."

My closing contention is that we thus need to distinguish between the broader group of slurs, and a smaller group that I will call *oppressive slurs.* Further, I claim that what is centrally interesting about oppressive slurs is how they contribute to achieving oppression. I will close by suggesting that a promising route is via an extension to speech act theory. Words, as pointed by Austin (1962), don't describe the world, they alter it. Exactly how is a matter for enquiry.

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2   At the time of writing the UK has just voted to leave the EU, primarily to reduce immigration, and there has been an upsurge in incidents of racial hatred. At the same time Donald Trump is running to be president of the USA, and has been criticised for using language that incites hatred of immigrants, Latinos and Muslims.