

Demeaning and Use: a Pragmatic Account of Slurs as Instances of Social Deixis

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Abstract

A slur is a derogatory epithet targeting an entire class of people. Slurs may target groups of people on the basis of race, nationality, religion, gender, sexual orientation, or any other feature deemed salient. Beyond the inherent interest sparked by their taboo and highly offensive nature, slurs are linguistically interesting in that they are highly resistant to standard logico-semantic analysis; as such, the theoretical study of slurs comprises a key intellectual battleground in the semantics vs. pragmatics debate. *Semantics* is the study of linguistic meaning as directly encoded in lexical structures. Pragmatics, in contrast, approaches meaning not primarily in terms of explicitly encoded information, but as being chiefly dependent upon the social and physical contexts of actual utterances. The philosopher Ludwig Wittgenstein famously even argued that in most cases a word's meaning just *was* its pragmatic use within a speech community. *Deixis* refers to the pragmatic phenomenon whereby the extralinguistic (e.g., spatiotemporal) context of an utterance is required to fix the reference or otherwise disambiguate the meaning of a lexical or grammatical structure. Examples of deictic terms are common *indexicals*, such as: "I," "here," and "now," which require information about the context of their utterance in order to achieve their proper reference, e.g., "now" self-reflexively refers to the precise time at which any particular tokening of said term is employed. *Social deixis*, however, concerns the lexicalization and grammaticalization of the social context of speakers, hearers, third persons, or other entities, and the differential relationships that obtain between them; it includes the study of *honorifics*, personal pronouns and the *tou/vous* distinction found in many Indo-European languages. Social deixis thus comprises the pragmatic study of linguistic items, which reflect, establish, or are determined by, realities of the social situation in which a particular speech act occurs. Information encoded by social deixis typically includes class, kin relationships, age, sex, profession, and ethnic group. In this paper I show that social deictic markers can be seen to track the same properties as slurs and thus contend slurs function as social-deictic markers of disrespect and contempt that target entire classes of people for discrimination based on a single identifying feature. Lastly, I argue that the social deictic analysis here offered provides a more unified and parsimonious account of the socio-linguistic properties of slurs than competing semantic theories.

Keywords: Deixis, Pragmatics, Slurs

1. Introduction:

Slurs are derogatory epithets directed at entire classes of people. Slurs may target groups of people on the basis of race ("honky"), nationality ("paki"), religion ("kike"), gender ("ho"), sexual orientation ("dyke"), immigrant status ("wetback"), culinary preferences ("beaner"), or any other feature deemed salient. Beyond the inherent interest sparked by their taboo and highly offensive nature, slurs are linguistically interesting in that they prove highly resistant to standard logical analysis. In this paper I endeavor to account for the linguistic properties of slurs while also attempting to answer the central question of whether the derogatory force of slurring terms is best understood as a *semantic* or *pragmatic* phenomenon. The field of linguistic semantics studies linguistic meaning as it is directly

encoded in lexical structures. Pragmatics, in contrast, approaches meaning not primarily in terms of explicitly encoded content, but rather as being functionally dependent upon a linguistic form's actual usage within a speech community. Of theoretical interest is the fact that the literal semantic meaning of a word or phrase may radically diverge from its pragmatic use within a speech community. For example, an English speaker may use the term "genius," which literally denotes an exceptionally intelligent person, to characterize someone as being stupid, e.g., "who is the *genius* that forgot to turn off the stove?" With regards to slurring words, therefore, a key question is whether the offensiveness of such terms is directly semantically encoded in their literal meaning or instead is best understood as a pragmatic function of how such terms are employed within a particular speech community.

Slurs thus comprise an important intellectual battleground in the larger semantics vs. pragmatics debate, a debate to which I intend this paper to contribute. I critique the work of three authors: Elizabeth Camp, J.A. Hedger, and Christopher Hom, all of whom contend the offensiveness of slurs is best explained semantically. I will argue for the opposite conclusion and defend a socio-pragmatic account. In particular, I will argue that the arguments given by all of the above authors in fact favor a social-deictic pragmatic account of slurs rather than a semantic one. I thus conclude that the examination of slurs as instances of social-deixis comprises a fruitful direction for future pragmatic research.

2. Linguistic Properties of Slurs

Slurs are perhaps the most harmful type of language; a deeper understanding of their nature may assist those of us who seek to combat such speech. A theory of slurs, ideally, should explain the offensiveness of such terms in a sociologically plausible way whilst also accounting for their somewhat puzzling logical properties: primarily their *wide-scoping* behavior. "Wide-scoping" refers to the fact that slurs generally do not functionally embed relative to logical operators. For example, the offensiveness of slurs 'scopes out' from the antecedent of conditionals (i.e., *If...then* statements) and from within the scope of *negation*, e.g., a statement such as "Juan is a spic," is just as likely to offend as its logically opposite (i.e., negated) statement: "Juan is *not* a spic." A slur's offensive character also exceeds the scope of propositional attitude reports (i.e., statements of *beliefs, hopes, desires*, etc.) and even direct quotation. For example, if a speaker utters the propositional attitude report: "John believes that *spic* Juan is an illegal immigrant," the derogatory attitude associated with the racial slur "spic" will typically be attributed to the *speaker* rather than to John's belief; the same is also largely true for cases of direct quotation. Furthermore, such wide scoping *overgeneralizes* in that it may even infect merely superficially similar forms, e.g., the non-slurring pejorative term "niggardly" inherits taboos associated with the racial slur "nigger," despite the fact that both terms are completely unrelated both semantically and etymologically. These wide-scoping tendencies of slurs, I argue, render a pragmatic account more plausible than a semantic one for the reason that pragmatic content is also known to display similar tendencies.¹

The analysis of slurs in the literature tends to follow a continuum from purely pragmatic to purely semantic. Pragmatic analyses of slurs are most often conducted in terms of *Speech Act theory* or *Gricean implicature*, to which I now turn.

3. Slurring as a Speech Act

Speech Act theory was developed by the Oxford philosopher J.L. Austin to account for instances of language use in which to *say* something is to *do* something, i.e., not merely to report or describe states of affairs. For example, when a bride during her wedding ceremony says: "I hereby take this man to be my lawfully wedded husband" she is not thereby *describing* a wedding—but actually *participating* in one. Austin called such speech actions *performative utterances*. Performative utterances include: promising, declaring (as in the wedding example above), asserting, betting, and threatening.² The philosopher John Searle further codified all possible speech acts into five exhaustive categories or *illocutionary forces*: *assertive, commissive, directive, expressive, and declarative*. The term "illocutionary force" simply refers to the particular type of speech act in question (e.g., a command is a directive whereas a promise is a commissive). An utterance's illocutionary force contrasts with its *perlocutionary effect*, i.e., the effect of a particular utterance upon a hearer. For example, if I *order* someone to bring me a cup of coffee I have produced a speech act with a directive illocutionary force; however, this may merely *annoy* the person thus ordered. The person's annoyance in this example is a perlocutionary effect of my order. Importantly however, perlocutionary effects are not generally under the control of the speaker—e.g., I can *bore* or *amuse* someone without intending to. Lastly, each type of speech act (as distinguished by its particular illocutionary force) is associated with a characteristic

condition of satisfaction, which determines whether said performative utterance succeeds or fails. In the case of ordering above the conditions of satisfaction are fulfilled if and only if the order is obeyed. Likewise, promises (which bear the commissive illocutionary force) may be kept or broken; commands (which bear the directive illocutionary force) are either fulfilled or not; and statements (i.e., assertives) may be true or false.

With regards to Speech Act theory, however, slurs are most often analyzed as bearing the *expressive* illocutionary force. An expressive speech act is an utterance which functions merely to express the psychological state of its speaker. The conditions of satisfaction for an expressive speech act are *presupposed*—i.e., it is taken for granted that the person uttering an expressive speech act actually bears the psychological state thereby expressed. Slurs, so considered, are thus thought of merely as expressions of contemptuous attitudes. In addition to their expressive illocutionary force, however, slurs also exhibit a very strong tendency to evoke negative perlocutionary *effects* in their hearers—namely *offense*—of which I will have much more to say in a moment.³

Camp and Hom both employ Speech Act theory in their examinations, and acknowledge both expressive and assertive dimensions to the act of slurring. Camp contends that slurs differ from pure expressives precisely in that they contain an element which is “extension determining.”⁴ The *extension* of a term is whatever object or property it refers to in the world, e.g., the extension of the term “blue” is the set of all blue things. Unlike pure expressive pejorative terms, such as “damn,” however, Camp argues that it can be shown that slurs contain an additional extension-determining core. This is why, according to Camp, the slur “kike” properly applies to all and only Jewish people, and “dyke” to all and only lesbians.⁵ As a proof of this extension-determining property Camp asked that we consider cases when slurs are embedded in other types of speech acts such as *commissives*, (a commissive speech act, such as a promise or a bet, is an utterance which functions to *commit* the speaker to a future action). Consider the following bet:

“I bet you they hire a n*gger and a dyke before they ever consider a white guy.”⁶

Granting that a non-racist would be unlikely to accept such a bet, it is nonetheless *logically* clear, argues Camp, what the payoff determining contingency would be were such a bet accepted: whether the company in question hired an African-American and a lesbian—or not. The conditions of satisfaction (i.e., payoff determining contingency) for the above commissive speech act (bet) thus depends upon, and demonstrates the existence of, an *extension determining* core in addition to the slurs’ expressive function. In the analysis offered by Camp the semantic extension determining “core” serves to single out a particular group of people (here African Americans and lesbians) to which the slur applies whereas the (pragmatic) expressive dimension accounts for the slurs’ wide-scoping logical behavior. In section 6, however, I will offer a socio-pragmatic alternative to Camp’s hybrid analysis of slurs.

4. Slurs and Gricean Implicature

Paul Grice made a distinction between what is *said* and what is *implicated* by an utterance: what is “said” is the literal (i.e., semantic) meaning of the expressions used, while what is “implicated” is the information the speaker intends his audience to pragmatically *infer* from what is uttered.⁷ For example, what is said by uttering the expression “could you pass the salt?” is a literally only a question about the hearer’s physical capabilities, but it implicates a request to pass the salt. Conversationally implicated content like the offensiveness of slurs also typically exceeds the scope of logical operators, which suggests a similar analysis might apply to both. Hom for example, contends the wide-scoping tendencies of slurs are best explained in terms of a difference between literal semantic content and conversationally implicated offensive content.⁸

An attraction of a Gricean account of slurs is that it provides a tidy explanation for cases of so-called *appropriated* uses of slurs (e.g., such as the “camaraderie” use of “n*gger” among African Americans). On this account an in-group member’s use of a slur is best seen as flouting the Gricean maxim of *relevance* or *quality*, thus generating an implicature in manner analogous to Grice’s account of irony, where the flouting of the relevant conversational maxim generates an implicature *opposite* to that of the slur’s derogatory literal meaning.⁹ Likewise, members of an “in group” may reclaim a slurring term for use as a marker of in-group camaraderie. Camp however, accounts for such appropriated uses of slurs on a different model; different uses of the same slur, according to Camp, reflect diametrically opposed feelings in the same manner as the use of the “*tu*” rather than “*vous*” forms found in many Indo-European languages may signal either intimacy or disrespect depending on context.¹⁰

In Camp’s view, by choosing to employ a slur rather than its neutral correlate a speaker signals their allegiance to a *derogating perspective* in an overt and non-defeasible way, whereas using a neutral correlate merely implicates such a perspective.¹¹ Consider the following pair of sentences as an example:

- (1) They gave the job I applied for to a *beaner*.
- (2) They gave the job I applied for to a Mexican American.

In (1) the speaker has willfully inserted a derogatory way of thinking about a particular subset of Hispanic people into the conversation. In the second sentence, however, the speaker's choice to mention ethnicity at all merely *implies* a bigoted attitude. Camp sees sentences such as the above as comprising a *minimal pair* which illustrates that a derogating perspective is a non-detachable part of (1)'s literal i.e., semantic meaning.¹² Camp's use of the term "minimal pair" derives from phonetics and morphology and refers to the smallest structural modification of a linguistic unit which has an effect upon its meaning. E.g., in English "cap" and "cab" comprise a minimal pair with respect to the phonemes [b] and [p]. However, rather than invoking the concept of a minimal pair, I contend the foregoing data is better accounted for by treating slurring terms as *social deixics*. I will now argue that there is reason to favor this explanation.

5. Offense vs. Derogation

I have shown above that all of the authors considered above employ either Gricean implicature or Speech Act theory to explain the wide-scoping behavior of slurs. In this section I examine their respective answers to the question of from whence slurs derive their offensive and derogatory force. As stated in my introduction, all of the authors under consideration here have attempted to explain the offensiveness of slurs chiefly in terms of semantics. However, as I have shown in the previous sections, each author makes recourse to the quintessentially pragmatic mechanisms of Speech Act theory and Gricean implicature when seeking to account for the wide-scoping behavior of slurring terms. I contend however, both properties are best accounted for pragmatically.

Recall, Hom posited that the (i.e., literal semantic) meaning of a slur is fixed by its reference to external social facts and corresponding institutions of prejudice, and that it is from these wider social inequalities that slurs proportionally inherit their offensive force. From this purportedly literal derogatory content Hom then attempts to account for slurs' 'wide-scoping' contextual behavior by the familiar mechanisms of Gricean implicature.¹³ Hedger, however, opposed Gricean explanations such as Hom's by claiming that the offensiveness of slurs is part of 'what is said' (i.e., the literally encoded semantic content) by uttering a slur rather than what is implicated, and thus in Hedger's view a slur cannot be uttered without saying something offensive.¹⁴ Hom, in turn, countered that such expressivist accounts fail to distinguish between *offense* and *derogation*. Offense, says Hom, is a subjective effect of pejorative language upon individuals while derogation is an objective semantic property of such words.¹⁵ Here, so I contend, Hom can be seen to have invoked the pragmatic distinction (from Speech Act theory) between the illocutionary force of a slurring expression and its *perlocutionary effects*, i.e., the offended reaction such a term typically evokes in hearers.

As I discussed in section 3, the perlocutionary effect of an utterance is not generally under the control of the speaker—a hearer's subjective reaction may operate quite independently of the literal meaning of any slurring expression. I argue that the distinction holding between derogation and offense mirrors that between *entailment* and *inference* respectively. Entailment is a logical relation—a non-cancellable objective semantic property of sentences, whereas inferring is an action—a social phenomenon. For example, the sentence "John killed the fly" entails that the fly is dead, but actually inferring the sentence "the fly is dead" from hearing the foregoing sentence is an extra cognitive step. Thus inferring, like taking offense, are both something one either does or does not do when confronted with a sentence. One may read or hear sentence *A*, which logically entails another *B*, yet may somehow fail to compute or otherwise refuse to make the inference from *A* to *B*. Similarly, one can hear an objectively derogatory remark and not take offense from it (as in the camaraderie uses discussed in the previous section). Offensiveness therefore cannot be an objective *semantic* property of slurs but is only a contingent (if ubiquitous) pragmatic perlocutionary effect of slurring terms. I now show how the foregoing insight in conjunction with the concept of *social deixis* suggests a unified pragmatic analysis of slurring terms.

6. Slurs as Instances of Social Deixis

Deixis (Greek for "pointing") is defined as: the phenomenon whereby contextual features of an utterance or speech event are encoded by lexical and/or grammatical means. Examples of deictic terms are the familiar *indexicals* such as: "I," "Here," and "now," which require information about their context of utterance in order to achieve their proper

reference. For example: “now” self-reflexively refers to (i.e., *indexes*) the precise *time* at which any particular tokening of said term is uttered or otherwise employed, while “here” indexes the specific *location* at which said term is used.

Social deixis concerns the codification of the social status of speakers, hearers, third persons or other entities, and the social relationships obtaining between them; it includes the study of honorifics, forms of address, personal pronouns, and the aforementioned *tou/vous* distinction. Information encoded in social deixis may include social class, kin relationships, age, sex, profession, or ethnic group. Thus social deictics can be seen to index the same extension determining properties as slurs, hence, I suggest, there is good reason to suspect that the latter comprise instances of the former.

Fillmore defined social deixis as: “the study of that aspect of sentences which reflect or establish or are determined by certain realities of the social situation in which the speech act occurs.”¹⁶ If slurs are, as I contend, instances of social deixis, this fact may account for their wide-scoping behavior. Potts & Kawahara for example, have shown that honorific content—much like that of slurs’ also “scopes-out” of negation and propositional attitude reports.¹⁷

Furthermore, I argue that Camp and Hedger (as shown in section 4) have both equated slurs to common social-deictic expressions without explicitly denominating them as such. Hedger, case in point, stated: “slurs are the other side of the coin of what we might call honorific titles, such as ‘sir’ or ‘miss,’”¹⁸ contending that slurs function to express contempt just as honorifics function to display respect. I contend that Honorifics, however, are paradigmatic examples of social deictic terms fully analyzable within the resources of the pragmatic theory of performative utterances (i.e., Speech Act Theory). Potts & Kawahara have similarly noted that: “honorifics are performative in that they achieve their intended act simply by being uttered: “they do not offer content for inclusion into the common ground so much as *inflict* content upon it.”¹⁹ Analogously, Camp compares slurring to the choice of “tu” instead of “vous” in French as a means to signal disrespect, and notes that the natural step beyond mere lack of respect is active contempt—especially considering that most users of slurs *do* feel contempt toward targeted groups, and this contempt is common knowledge among members of the cultural-linguistic community.²⁰

Lastly, Hom, as outlined in the previous section, said much to the same effect, though in a more recondite manner via an application of his externalist semantics whereby he attributed the derogatory force of slurs to their corresponding institutionalized prejudices.²¹ Camp, in turn, cited Hom’s account to bolster her own by agreeing with him that: “a slur’s derogatory power appears to be directly proportional to the power of associated social institutions and their networks to enforce them, with anything from fists to job quotas.”²² Thus, all of the aforementioned authors appear to have provided arguments which support my claim that the offensiveness of slurring terms is ultimately determined via reference to the wider social context in which they figure, but to do so however, so I argue, is equivalent to accounting for slurring terms pragmatically as instances of social deixis. Thus a pragmatic social deictic account is sufficient to account for both the offensiveness of slurring terms as well as their wide-scoping logical behavior thus rendering an additional semantic account otiose. I thus conclude that a pragmatic account of slurring terms as instances of social deixis comprises the more parsimonious theoretical choice.

7. Conclusion

I have argued that a socio-pragmatic account, which considers slurs as instances of social-deixis, is compatible with the arguments put forth above by Hom, Hedger, and Camp in favor of a semantic theory but without requiring any additional semantic apparatus. I therefore contend that an equally adequate yet more parsimonious theoretical choice is to fully account for the offensiveness and “wide scoping” properties of slurs pragmatically as instances of social deixis. In conclusion I suggest that future pragmatic research examine slurs as social-deictic markers of disrespect and contempt, particularly as markers which target entire classes of people based on a single identifying feature.

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