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The Semantics of Slurs: A Dual Speech-Act Analysis

Slurs are powerfully incendiary linguistic expressions, so much so that hearers typically take offense at utterances containing slurs embedded within plugging or 'inoculating' contexts, such as conditionals, speech and attitude reports, and even direct quotation. Philosophers and linguists have recently wrestled with what theoretical role to assign to the derogatory attitudes that make slurs so offensive: Are they part of those expressions' semantic values? Presuppositions? Conventional or conversational implicatures? I argue that explaining the full pattern of behavior supports a dual-speech acts view, on which slurs make two distinct but coordinated contributions to the illocutionary act: a truth-conditional predication of group membership, and a commitment to the appropriateness of a derogating perspective on that group. Different semantic constructions and pragmatic contexts alter the relative prominence and scope of these two acts.

Slurs are an important topic for philosophical investigation for at least two reasons. First, in practical terms, they are potent, incendiary expressions. We need to understand the psychological, sociological, linguistic, and political factors that make them so powerful, how these interact, and what we as individuals and groups should do about it. Second, in theoretical terms, they display an intriguing pattern of behavior that has led philosophers and linguists to occupy basically every possible position in logical space, without any one view emerging as the clear champion, because each faces some sort of drawback. Worse, there is important diversity of opinion about the facts to be explained, especially concerning the truth and falsity of sentences containing slurs.

I don't want to claim that I am going to stake out a bold, heretofore unrealized possibility that will make all the theoretical problems disappear. Rather, I'll offer a brief tour through the leading candidates, noting their most important drawbacks. Then I'll propose that explaining the full pattern of behavior supports a dual-acts view, on which slurs make two distinct but coordinated contributions to the illocutionary act: a truth-conditional predication of group membership, and a commitment to the appropriateness of a derogating perspective on that group. I argued for the latter claim in my (2013): that the 'other' component associated with slurs, which differentiates them from their extensionally-equivalent neutral counterparts, is a commitment to the appropriateness of an essentializing, 'distancing' perspective on the targeted group. Here I'll mostly bracket the question of exactly what 'else' slurs do, and focus on where we should locate this element. My claim will be that accounting for the full range of behavior displayed by slurs, and especially for the variability in projection through complex contexts, supports a dual-act analysis.

1) Univocal views

The most minimal account of slurs holds that a slur's semantic content is exhausted by the predication of group membership (Anderson and Lepore 2013). On this account, just one of

(1) Isaiah is a kike.

(2) Isaiah is not a kike.

is true, depending entirely on whether Isaiah is Jewish. The most basic objection to it stems from its minimalism: it appears to ignore the entire point and power of a slur, what differentiates it from its extensionally-equivalent neutral counterpart; treating what is offensive about the slur as external to it. More specifically, it is often the case that a response of (2) to (1), by someone who is manifestly not bigoted, is still naturally interpreted as perpetuating the same offensive way of thinking as is promulgated by (1). This suggests that the offensiveness stems, not just from the user of a slur, but from the expression itself, independent of the user's intentions and commitments.

Anderson and Lepore have an answer for this: they explain the difference between slurs and their neutral counterparts, and the shared complicity of a response like (2), by pointing out that slurs are taboo expressions, and that violating a taboo has powerful causal effects on hearers, and can serve as a powerful signal by the speaker. For Anderson and Lepore, the factors leading to prohibition are merely causal, not part of the term's semantics. Thus, they maintain that "Slurs are offensive *not* because of what they mean or convey, but rather because their uses are prohibited, and so, they offend those for whom these prohibitions matter….to infer [that a slur's associations] are responsible for its high offense potential is to put the cart before the horse."

This is a highly counterintuitive claim in its own right. Further, it is not clear that a pure taboo view explains the particular kind of offense that slurs arouse in recalcitrant hearers. I might be embarrassed *for* someone who utters taboo words like 'shithead' or 'fucker' in an inappropriate context, or be angry at them for having shocked me, my children, or my grandmother. But I don't feel at risk of being implicated in their bad behavior, the way I do with a slur: their crude speech is their problem, not mine. Further, when I am the target of a slur, I don't merely feel offended; I feel threatened and denigrated, in a way I wouldn't if the speaker employed a pure taboo pejorative.

This difference is underlined by the fact that other taboo words do have some appropriate circumstances of utterance: they are not to be uttered in polite company, but they are useful expressions precisely because their tokening expresses an emphatic attitude or an intimate social affiliation. By contrast, I and many others take it that slurs are *never* warranted, while bigots think their causal use is often appropriate. Indeed, many older bigots don't appear to treat slurs as taboo expressions at all: the slurs constitute their preferred, default expressions for the targeted group, because they take them to be the appropriate way to refer to them. Further, intuitively the reason the bigot and I differ in our opinion about whether slurs can ever be appropriately employed is that we disagree about whether it expresses an appropriate attitude to have toward members of the targeted group. A bigot speaking to other bigots knows the slur will not cause offense; she chooses to use the term because she takes it to capture a shared, and warranted way of thinking about members of that group. Finally, pinning a slur's offensiveness entirely on the tokening of a taboo expression fails to explain the way in which even a hearer who directly denies (1) while avoiding using the term, as with

(3) That's not true./That's false.

is typically and most naturally construed as merely denying the attribution of group membership, while being rendered conversationally complicit by allowing the offensive way of thinking to go unchallenged.

Hom (2008) addresses many of these worries by offering an analysis at the other semantic extreme, packing a rich, complex collection of factual and normative assumptions into a slur's core predicative content. Here is his statement of the content of 'chink':

> 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 being Chinese (Hom 2008, 431).

A direct implication of the view is that, because the complex normative ascription in this predication is false, all slurs have null extensions. Hom avoids claiming that all competent users and hearers of the slur have a fully explicit ideology, of the sort he partially articulates in the definitional clause, by appealing to externalism and deference. Although one might raise worries about the plausibility of this move, the more important problem concerns the account's failure to explain slurs' distinctive, characteristic projective behavior. The pattern observed with (2) and (3), on which negations and direct denials end up implicating the speaker herself in the objectionable way of thinking, persists across other complex constructions, as in:

> (4) Have you ever even heard of a nigger ordering a white cop to get out of his house?
> (5) Just get two spics to come clean up the yard for you.
> (6) She could have married a chink instead.
> (7) If they promote another bitch out of this job before me, I'm going to sue for discrimination.
> (8) If the new hire is one of those Jews, then they'll regret hiring a kike.
> (9) John thinks that spics can't be trusted to handle cash.

This dramatic projective behavior is something that Anderson and Lepore can explain straightforwardly: because the offense not part of the semantics, it is impervious to all compositional semantic machinery. Hom also deals with these examples by pointing out that utterances can produce offense simply in virtue of tokening an expression. He provides important positive motivation for his account by noting a range of cases, which he calls 'Nonderogatory, nonappropriated' (NDNA) uses, in which the offensive way of thinking does not project out to the speaker herself, such as

> (10) Yao Ming is Chinese, but he's not a chink.

> (11) Racists believe that Chinese people are chinks.

> (12) Am I racist if I believe that Chinese people are chinks?

This variability in projective behavior – the fact the slurs' offensive perspective often, but not always, projects out to the speaker, is the central phenomenon I'll focus on explaining. However, while Hom draws our attention to an important class of exceptions to the widely-touted claim of universal projection, his view fails to explain the vast range of cases in which the slurring perspective does project.

His view faces other serious challenges; for instance, he is committed to the 'null-extensionality thesis': the claim that no atomic predications of slurs to individuals, such as (1), can ever be true, in any sense. This thesis in turn entails that slurs are "conceptually unrelated" to what one would pre-theoretically have taken to be their extensionally equivalent, cognitively intimately linked neutral counterparts (Hom and May 2013). Further, Hom and May (2013) maintain that the moral facts which falsify atomic predications like (1) and generate null-extensionality are so conceptually fundamental to the moral fabric of reality that a bigot who believes (1) fails to understand what the word 'kike' even means. Where Hom takes these implications to be illuminating results, I take them to constitute a *reductio* – or at least, to motivate the search for a more plausible alternative.

Hom is far from alone in taking sentences containing slurs to lack any clearly truth-evaluable content. Other theorists, such as Dummett (1981), Hornsby (2001), and Richard (2008), also maintain that the offensive way of thinking associated with slurs is such an intimate part of their meaning that we cannot assess sentences containing them, like (1) and (2), as either true or false without rendering ourselves complicit in the bigot's way of thinking. As Richard (20008, 3-4) puts it,

> Imagine standing next to someone who uses S as a slur… the racist mutters *that building is full of Ss*. Many of us are going to resist allowing that what the racist said was true. After all, if we admit its truth, we must believe that it is true that the building is full of Ss. And if we think that, we think that the building is full of Ss. We think, that is, what and as the racist thinks.[1]

Like Hom, and unlike Anderson and Lepore, these views explain the intuition that the user of a slur gets something deeply wrong, and specifically in a way that affects truth-value. Again, I think this is an intuition we need to take seriously. However, I also think that denying even the possibility of truth to either of (1) and (2) goes too far: if Isaiah is Jewish, then there's a clear sense in which (1) is accurate; and if he's not, then (2) is. As Kaplan (1999) puts it, "Truth is immune to epithetical color."

The availability of a straightforwardly truth-conditional content for slurs is demonstrated even more clearly with illocutionary acts other than assertion. Thus, a non-bigot should almost certainly refuse to accept a bet couched in terms of a slur, as in

(13) I'll bet you they hire a nigger and a dyke before they even consider a white guy.

Doing so would make her complicit in the derogation of blacks and lesbians. However, supposing that the bet *has* been accepted, it is fairly clear what payoff depends upon: just whether the company hires a black person and a lesbian, not on whether the expressed attitude toward those groups is appropriate. Similarly, the speaker in (5) is ordering or recommending that the addressee hire two Hispanic people for a job, and not ordering them to make it the case that Hispanics warrant being thought of and treated in a certain way. Finally, if we imagine altering Richard's example, so that the building is burning and the racist utters

(14) There are 26 kikes in that building and 15 God-fearing Christians.

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[1] Cf. Dummett (1981, 527): "Most of us will not say that S is true: [we] will simply say, 'I should never say that' or 'No one should ever say that.'"

then it becomes fairly obvious that the non-bigot easily can and should extract from the utterance the straightforwardly truth-conditional information that the building contains 26 Jews.

2) Two-factor views

Anderson and Lepore's 'pure' taboo view elegantly captures the intuition that slurs are truth-conditionally equivalent to their neutral counterparts; while Hom's view captures the intuition that an essential part of what slurs do – what they are conventionally designed to do – is express a complex negative way of thinking about a group, one that non-bigots take to be false and offensive. Each view has its own drawbacks. But both have a hard time explaining the variability in the projective behavior: Anderson and Lepore's view can't explain failures to project the slurring perspective, while Hom has a hard time explaining the pervasiveness of projection. A natural way to address this apparent impasse is to hold that slurs accomplish two things, more or less independently: predicating group membership and expressing a slurring perspective. The truth-conditional predication contributes to the 'at-issue' content of the primary illocutionary act (assertion, question, order, etc.), and so is caught up in the usual compositional machinery of negation, denial, conditionalization, and so on. By contrast, because the slurring perspective is not at-issue, it projects out of such constructions.

In the end, this is a version of the sort of view I want to defend. To motivate a full-on dual-acts view, though, we need to examine the two standard models for analyzing not-at-issue content: presupposition and conventional implicature. Applied to slurs, both have intuitive advantages, but also significant difficulties.

2.1) Presupposition

Intuitively, it is perhaps most natural to claim that slurs conventionally presuppose derogatory perspectives. Bigots use slurs because those expressions reflect an overall way of thinking about the targeted group which they take to be appropriate, and which they often present as being mutually conversationally assumed to be appropriate, as in

(15) Some spic on the bus was saying that Manny is going to retire at the end of the season.
(16) He plays ball like a nigger.
(17) He's a kike, so I'm sure he's got some extra money stashed away somewhere.

This also explains why non-bigoted hearers find it so difficult to respond to slurs: because the stereotype's appropriateness is assumed and 'off the table', a direct response will normally target the at-issue, truth-conditional content. Challenging the stereotype disrupts the conversational flow in much the way the presupposition triggered by 'He has stopped beating his wife' does, requiring the sort of 'Hey, wait a minute!' interjection that von Fintel (2004) and others employ to diagnose presuppositions.

The first problem with the presuppositional account is that it fails to capture slurs' pattern of projection, in particular the fact that their offensive aspect regularly projects through contexts where

presuppositions are blocked. As we've seen, this includes presupposition plugs like attitude reports and indirect quotation, as in

(9) John thinks that spics can't be trusted to handle cash.

for which the most natural reading is one on which the reporting speaker endorses the slur's derogatory perspective. It also includes presupposition filters, most notably the consequents of conditionals. In general, when the antecedent of a conditional entails the truth of a presupposition which is triggered by the clause in the consequent, as in

(18) If John is a father, then his children don't live very close by.

then that presupposition fails to project out of the entire conditional: it has been bound by the antecedent. However, with analogous constructions involving slurs, such as

(8) If the new hire is one of those Jews, then they'll regret hiring a kike.

the offensive stereotype does project out, so that the speaker herself is committed to its applicability.

Various linguists, including Lasersohn (2007), Schlenker (2007) and Sauerland (2007), have suggested that a presuppositional account of expressives like 'damn' or 'fucker' can be saved by analyzing the presuppositions indexically, so that the expressed attitudes are anchored to the actual context of utterance, and specifically that they get attributed to the actual speaker. One might question the force of claiming that the attitudes in question are genuinely presupposed if they don't behave like presuppositions. But even if this suggestion can be made to work for 'pure' expressives, it is considerably less plausible for slurs, because slurs behave differently from expressives in filtering contexts. In particular, Lasersohn (2007, 227) supports his presuppositional analysis by pointing out that expressives *do* bind in filtering contexts like conditional consequents. As he says, a speaker of

(19) I consider John a saint. But if he ever screws me over, I'll crush the bastard like a bug!

> might be accused of being volatile, but not incoherent…The description of John as a bastard is conditionalized on the (unexpected) event of his 'screwing over' the speaker, so that the expressive content does not project up to the sentence as a whole.

By contrast, this is not what we find with slurs: for instance, if the speaker prefaces (8) with a supposed 'disclaimer' like

(8') I think Jews are awesome; some of my best friends are Jewish. But if the new hire is one of those Jews, then the kike will be running the books in no time.

then the speaker is still committed to the essentializing, 'distancing' perspective; it is not conditionalized by the antecedent. The fact that the attitudinal component binds in presupposition filters for expressives is

an important piece of evidence for a presuppositional analysis of them. But by the same token, the failure to bind in the case of slurs constitutes evidence against a presuppositional analysis of slurs.[2]

A second objection is that slurs' derogatory perspectives don't behave like presuppositions in contexts where the speaker cannot assume mutual endorsement among conversational participants. Presuppositions are, by definition, background assumptions: mutually assumed prior to the presentation of 'at-issue' content, or at least presented as being mutually assumed. But very often, the speaker of a slur knows that the hearer strongly rejects the derogatory perspective; moreover, the speaker's rhetorical strategy is most definitely not one of slipping the objectionable perspective in to the conversational record by means of accommodation. Rather, in cases like

(20) You cunt!
(21) You'll never be nothing but a nigger however many degrees you get.

the speaker's main aim is to actively derogate the targeted group, and usually also the individual(s) of whom the slur is predicated. These slurs are "fighting words" *par excellence*: words "which by their very utterance inflict injury or tend to incite an immediate breach of the peace." Their offensive attitudes are 'hurled' like a rock at the hearer, in order to bully them into submission, not smuggled in through the back door (Richard 2008, 20; Potts 2005, 33).[3]

2.2) Conventional implicature

Where the presupposition view struggles to explain the fact that the derogatory perspective typically projects through plugs and filters, the conventional implicatures has a neat explanation for this fact. By definition, *conventional* implicatures are not cancellable, and so should be generated by any nearly use of the relevant term. But *qua implicatures*, they count as mere side-comments, not affecting the truth-conditions of 'at-issue' content or 'what is said', including in complex constructions. As a result, the CI view seems well-situated to explain both the intuition that a speaker who uses a slur thereby undertakes a non-defeasible commitment to thinking of the targeted group in a certain way, and also the intuition that the wrongness of this way of thinking doesn't undermine the (potential) truth of the predication of group membership.

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[2] As McCready (2010, 9) notes, it is not at all straightforward to assess the accuracy of this prediction, because the test depends on accurately paraphrasing the contribution of the relevant expression in the consequent ('bastard', 'kike') within the antecedent, in order to set up the appropriate entailment, which is especially difficult given the slippery, amorphous quality of slurs' non-predicative element. But even if the projection here is the result of inadequate paraphrase, the persistence of projection in these cases is still an important piece of data, and a clear contrast from 'pure' expressives.

[3] Richard argues that it is a general fact about our linguistic community that speakers cannot assume mutual endorsement of the offensive perspective, and so that slurs' offensive perspectives never function presuppositionally. I think this reflects an overly optimistic sense of the linguistic community as a whole (or at least in Philadelphia as opposed to Cambridge).

Williamson (2009) and Whiting (2013) defend versions of a CI view along traditional Gricean lines, while Potts (2005) offers a linguistically-driven account which posits syntactically distinct dimensions of meaning. Potts (2005) presents his account as covering both expressives, such as

(22) I bet that fucker Bates will get tenure with three publications.

and also appositive constructions like

(23) John thinks that Bill Russell, the two-term Republican city counselor, will get him a job.

However, much of the subsequent discussion around Potts' initial proposal has focused on expressives; this is partly because the account derives some of its theoretical motivation from the idea that expressive material is different in kind from truth-conditional content.

There are important theoretical differences between the traditional and Pottsian accounts, but I think they're mostly irrelevant to our discussion here. The first, familiar problem, is that the projective behavior is not as consistent as proponents of the CI view maintain. In many cases the derogatory perspective associated with a slur does indeed scope out of a complex constructions, producing a speaker-commitment independent of the main, at-issue truth conditions. However, as we've seen, in other cases it is blocked. This includes Hom's NDNA cases, but also especially speech and attitude reports. Thus,

(24) John thinks the spics will have taken over the whole neighborhood in another couple of years. But of course, I think it's great that we have such a vibrant Latino community developing here.

is a coherent utterance – especially if uttered with contrastive emphasis on 'John' and 'I'. Linguists have brought forward a battery of counterexamples to Potts' (2005) claim that expressives universally project, for which analogous instances can often be constructed with slurs:

(25) My father screamed that he would never allow me to marry that kraut Webster. (Kratzer)
(26) Churchill thought Gandhi was the most degenerate wog in all of India. (Anand 2007)

In these cases, the speaker provides contextual cues that she does not share the reported agent's attitude that are clear enough to prevent her from being tarred by her use of the slur. In his (2007), Potts weakens his analysis to allow for cases in which an expressive's "perspective dependence" is tied to someone other than the speaker. While this accommodates the data, it also renders his view considerably closer to the 'attitudinal indexical' views of presupposition theorists like Lasersohn, and compromises much of the initial impetus for positing a logically distinct expressive compositional system.

The second worry is that the speaker's endorsement of the derogatory perspective often behaves more like 'what is said'. Thus, Kent Bach (1999, 340) proposes what the "IQ Test" for 'what is said':

An element of a sentence contributes to what is said in an utterance of that sentence iff there can be an accurate and complete indirect quotation of the utterance (in the same language) which includes that element, or a corresponding element in the 'that'-clause that specifies what is said.

He then argues that this criterion appears to classify expressions like 'but' and 'therefore' as belonging to 'what is said' – indeed, he concludes that we should be suspicious of conventional implicatures as a class. By extension, Hom (2008, 425) argues that reports replacing slurs with their neutral counterparts, as in

(27) Institutions that treat Chinese as chinks are racist.
(27$_R$) *A* said that institutions that treat Chinese as Chinese are racist.

are intuitively incomplete, sometimes to the point of incoherence. While it is far from obvious that the notion of 'what is said' is robust enough to support such fine-grained semantic theorizing, Bach's test does suggest that the choice to employ a slur, and the attitudes a speaker thereby expresses, are too central to the speaker's overall speech act to simply be ignored in an indirect report. By contrast, analogous indirect reports of other putative conventional implicatures are much more plausibly assessed as "complete and accurate":

(28) Bill Russell, the two-term Republican city counselor, is going to get me a job.
(28$_R$) John said that Bill Russell will get him a job.
(29) Damn! My fucking cell phone is on the fucking fritz again.
(29$_R$) Jane said that her cell phone isn't working again.

Because the CI view demotes the derogatory perspective to a mere side-comment, it cannot explain the strong intuitive sense of incompleteness here.

A related problem arises with greater force at the level of thought, as opposed to speech. As with Anderson and Lepore, the core claim of the CI account is that a slur and its neutral counterpart are truth-conditionally equivalent; their only difference lies in the further thoughts they suggest.[4] A direct consequence is that on a CI view (as on Anderson and Lepore's), the bigot and non-bigot believe the same content: for instance, both believe (1) is true, depending on whether they think Isaiah is Jewish. Similarly, on the CI view, bigoted reports of neutral attitudes, such as

(30) Jane thinks some of her students are spics.

can be true. But if I were Jane, I would deny this report as emphatically as possible. I wouldn't merely find the reporting speaker's way of talking reprehensible, or think that he had engaged in some editorializing of his own; I would feel that *I*, and specifically my cognitive state, had been wildly mischaracterized. Williamson (2009, 14) dismisses these observations as a difficulty only for "Frege's simple account of propositional attitude ascriptions," not posing any direct challenge to the core claim of truth-conditional equivalence. But the problems here clearly do not arise from any particular details of Frege's account. Further, as Hom points out, they don't depend on attitude reports in particular: on a CI view, as on a pure taboo view,

(31) I am Jewish, not a kike.

is analytically contradictory, while

(32) I am Jewish, not a kike.
(33) Jews are kikes.

are analytically true (Hom 2008, 421-2).

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[4] Williamson (2009): "Just as 'Lessing was a Boche' and 'Lessing was a German' differ in conventional implicatures while being truth-conditionally equivalent, so too 'Helen is polite but honest' and 'Helen is polite and honest' differ in conventional implicatures while being truth-conditionally equivalent."

Moreover, because the CI view treats the bigot's belief as equivalent to one expressed with a neutral counterpart, it lacks the resources to explain what is wrong with the cognitive state the bigot expresses with his slurring speech, as opposed to the speech itself. This leads Williamson (2009, 26) to conclude that "pejorativeness is a more sophisticated phenomenon" than one might have thought: "pejorative concepts [cannot] occur at a quite primitive level of thought," since the only way to have pejorative *thoughts* is to "engage in silent communication with oneself," in order to "manipulate[] the rhetorical effects of one's own thoughts on oneself." But this conclusion is intuitively implausible: just as Anderson and Lepore's claim that slurs are offensive because they are prohibited seems to get the causal and normative story backward, so too here we want to say that the bigot chooses his words *because* it reflects how he thinks, not that he is a bigot because he has talked himself into it. This conclusion also runs afoul of empirical evidence suggesting that stereotypes and in-group preferences are developmentally prior to and more easily accessible than concepts as philosophers understand them (e.g. Porter 1971, Higgins and King 1981, Devine 1989).

Finally, the CI view is vulnerable to the same basic objection as the presupposition view: because it explains the independence of the slurring perspective from the truth of the compositional, at-issue content by treating the perspective as a mere side comment, it cannot explain 'weapon' cases like (20) and (21), where group membership is mutually known and the speaker's primary point is to express the perspective and everything it entails.

3) From Multidimensionalism to Multiplicity

At this point, then, we've found important motivations for some sort of two-factor account, but we've also seen that analyses in terms of both presupposition and conventional implicature face serious objections. With respect to projection, both predict behavioral patterns that are not consistently manifested. Proponents of each view have proposed amendments to deal with these counterexamples – thereby bringing the views considerably closer together. But the fact that each view also suffers from additional problems suggests that something less technical and more fundamental is amiss, something stemming from the basic move to segregate some material as essentially not-at-issue in virtue of semantic structure, and to make at-issue content the only content that counts when it comes to evaluation for truth.

The general problem of 'coloring' has dogged analytic philosophy from its start; and Frege, Grice, and others who have addressed coloring and conventional implicature have long admitted that the line between what does and does not affect 'the truth-conditions of what is asserted' is frequently very hazy. Bach (1999) and Neale (1999) suggest that the best way to explain this haziness is to drop the assumption that an utterance can only 'really' express a single proposition. Instead, a single utterance can undertake multiple, distinct speech acts: a 'primary', 'at-issue', or 'ground-floor' one, which typically serves as the focus for denial and other responses, and a 'secondary', 'higher-order' one. The latter typically offers a commentary upon some aspect of the primary one. However, depending on the semantic construction, the conversational context, and the speaker's illocutionary aims, this second

speech act may be more or less prominent and central. In some cases it may be included within, or even become the focus of, denial, indirect report, or other response.

Simons, Tonhauser, Beaver and Roberts (2010) provide this rather programmatic suggestion with a bit more substance by proposing that the various phenomena of 'not-at-issue content' – presupposition, conventional implicature, honorifics, etc. – constitute a unified class, and that projective behavior can be explained in terms of not-at-issue status. On their model, the distinction in status between at-issue and not is a pragmatic property, but understood in a relatively constrained way, in terms of discourse structure: content is at-issue if it contributes at least a partial answer to the operative Question Under Discussion. Some lexical constructions, like clefting or appositive clauses, conventionally mark material as at-issue or not; infelicity results when there is a clash between the discourse status of the relevant content and its lexical implementation.

Simons et al's proposal is a bold one, whose evaluation is well beyond our current scope. Here, I'm interested just in the idea that there is a default semantic classification into primary, at-issue content and secondary content, but that this difference in status is at least in part driven by rhetorical and pragmatic structure, and as such is potentially malleable by context. We add to this the hypothesis that what is projected as not-at-issue is not just 'content', but a speech act: the undertaking of a commitment by the speaker. This may be to the truth of a proposition, as with an appositive clause; or to a certain relative social status, as with honorifics; or to having a certain feeling, as arguably happens with pure expressives.

What would such a multiple-acts model look like, applied to slurs? As I said earlier, the two speech acts are first, the illocutionary act determined by combining the pure predicative content of membership in group G with the rest of the sentence's constituents in the usual compositional manner; and second, an endorsement of an essentializing and 'distancing' or 'othering' perspective on members of G (Camp 2013). In purely theoretical terms, the difference between a dual-acts and a conventional implicature account may appear small, but I believe that it matters, both in explaining the varied projective behavior we have observed, and in explaining the insidious and puzzling rhetorical power and effects that slurs have.

Stepping back from the various examples above, I think we discern the following overall pattern. The essentializing, 'distancing' perspective that distinguishes slurs from their neutral counterparts can be bound relatively easily by attitudinal and speech reporting constructions.

(24) John thinks the spics will have taken over the whole neighborhood in another couple of
      years. But I think it's great that we have such a vibrant Latino community developing here.
(26) My father screamed that he would never allow me to marry that kraut Webster. (Kratzer)
(27) Churchill thought Gandhi was the most degenerate wog in all of India. (Anand 2007)

Why is this? Typically, a speech or attitude report is intended to reflect and explain the reported agent's overall state of mind; and typically, when a reported speaker uses a slur, she does so because she takes it

to express and explain a larger pattern of facts and evaluations, collected under the slurring perspective. Thus,

> (9) John thinks that spics can't be trusted to handle cash.
> (20') John says that the spics will have taken over the whole neighborhood in another couple of years.

naturally attribute the slurring perspective to John, because that perspective helps to explain why he believes or said those narrowly truth-conditional contents. Conversely, because a key part of what slurs are designed to do is express a speaker's commitment to a derogating perspective on the targeted group, in most cases a "complete and accurate" report of an utterance containing a slur should indicate that the speaker has undertaken this commitment. However, if the conversation is focused on exchanging purely truth-conditional information, or if it is contextually obvious that the reported speaker would reject the slurring perspective, then the reporting construction may be construed in a narrowly truth-conditional way; and in that case the slur's associated perspective may scope out entirely to the reporting speaker, as is likely to happen with cases like (34) and (35), respectively:

> (34) Eric says that they've been hiring a lot recently: two spics and three dagos in the last month.
> (35) Jane tells me her Feminazi friends are going to parade around town in their panties for one of those 'Take Back the Night' things.

In addition to a general default but defeasible assumption that indirect reports accurately reflect the reported speaker's overall state of mind and commitments, there is also a general default but defeasible assumption that an indirect report accurately reflects the report*ing* speaker's state of mine. As a result, absent indications to the contrary, a slur's associated perspective will 'scope out', to apply to the reporting speaker herself. A default assumption of consonance between the reporter and reporting agents' views is not distinctive to slurs; it is also characteristic of metaphor, as well as presuppositions, appositive clauses, and other forms of not-at-issue content. But in all these cases, again, the reporting speaker can successfully 'bind' the relevant assumptions within the report, by explicitly or implicitly indicating that she doesn't share them, as occurs in (24) through (27).[5]

The issue here is not just a narrow one of the semantics of indirect reports, as Williamson maintains; it extends to any expression that describes, or whose applicability depends upon, an agent's commitments and stance – even if the agent is not intuitively (even if legally) a person, such as

> (28) Institutions that treat Chinese as chinks are racist.

Speech and attitude reports, then, are fairly flexible, including or excluding slurring perspectives from attribution to either the reported or reporting agent. Of course, because slurring perspectives are so repugnant to non-bigots, and because slurs themselves are so taboo, a non-bigoted speaker will want to strenuously avoid any imputation of the slur and its perspective to herself, either in reporting or being

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[5] Harris and Potts (2009) provide empirical evidence both that such perspective-shifting is indeed systematically possible for evaluatively loaded expressions, including appositives (using experiments), and also that it is comparatively rare in actual speech (using corpus analysis).

reported. Especially given the contextual variability of indirect reports, a wise reporting speaker will strenuously mark her distance from the slur and its perspective, and a wise reported speaker will object to being reported in those terms. For this same reason, a speaker who fails to strongly distance herself from this perspective will naturally be taken to endorse it, and depending on the circumstances, may rightly be held responsible for not having explicitly repudiated it or engaging in circumlocution (cf. Harris and Potts 2009, 546-7, Lasersohn 2007, 228).

Given that ordinary people normally talk and think about cognitive attitudes and speech in fairly flexible and encompassing terms, it is not surprising that their reports should follow suit, aiming to capture an agent's overall conversational contribution or mental state. By contrast, operators like negation, conditionals, and modals are more narrowly truth-conditional. Applied to slurs, they thus tend to hew more narrowly to the predication of group membership, leaving the slurring perspective to scope out to the speaker herself. This is especially true for conditionals and modals, where 'bound' readings are extremely rare (I can't think of any clearly convincing ones). However, as various theorists have observed, in the right semantic and conversational context, negation can 'bind' the slurring perspective, as in

(2) Isaiah is not a kike.

when uttered in a context where it is manifestly common knowledge that Isaiah is Jewish, or

(10) Yao Ming is Chinese, but he's not a chink.

(32) I am Jewish, not a kike.

Because utterances of these sentences cannot be interpreted as substantive, coherent contributions to the conversation if negation applies to the predication of group membership, negation targets the perspective instead. More specifically, these sentences deny the applicability of the slurring perspective to the individual of whom the slur is predicated, while leaving its appropriateness for thinking about other members of that group unchallenged, or challenged only by extension. I think this is partly because slurring perspectives have generic force, applying to members of the targeted group in general in virtue of what the slur presents as a universal 'essence' that tolerates exceptions, so denying any particular instance fails to undermine the whole. However, it also seems that in these cases, the perspective replaces the (contextually irrelevant) predication of group membership as the primary predicative material. This is why universally quantified negative sentences, like

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

are typically the most effective explicit, direct denials of a slurring predication, although denials like 'That's not true' or 'I disagree' can sometimes also be used, with marked supplementation, to target the slurring perspective as well.[6]

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[6] I also think there is important variation among slurs in how easily negation can target the perspective, depending on how robust a stereotype is associated with the perspective: the more stereotypical the perspective, the easier it is for negation to target it.

In addition to having the flexibility to deal with the projection behavior in complex constructions, the dual acts view also does a better job of sorting out intuitions about the truth-values of simple, unembedded constructions involving slurs, like

> (1) Isaiah is a kike.
> (2) Isaiah is not a kike.

As we've seen, there is an important sense in such constructions are straightforwardly truth-evaluable, depending only on the attribution of membership in the targeted group *G*. In particular, group membership clearly determines the satisfaction conditions for illocutionary acts other than assertion, such as bets and orders. In this sense, one or the other of (1) and (2) get something importantly right – specifically, true – about the world. But at the same time, there is a strong recurrent intuition that *something* is wrong with these sentences, and more specifically that something representationally wrong – false – with them. Forced to answer the question: 'Is (1) true? Yes or no!' most of us are inclined to opt for the answer that it is true, just in case Isaiah is Jewish. But we still have the feeling that we've been coerced into something; and at least people, including Dummett (1981), Richard (2008), and Hom (2008), respond to this feeling either by answering negatively, or by refusing to answer the question at all. The dual acts view allows us to diagnose this mixture of intuitions: it results from being asked to deliver a single, unequivocal verdict on what is really a composite act (cf. Neale 1999, 63). Depending on the speaker's purposes and our own concerns, we may assign more or less weight to the slurring perspective, with commensurate implications for our assessment of the overall utterance's truth value. In addition, the demand to deliver a univocal judgment is made more challenging by the fact that the secondary speech act doesn't straightforwardly assert a determinate proposition, as for instance an appositive construction does, but instead endorses an essentializing, 'distancing' perspective with generic force that may include a range of stereotypical features and affective responses.

Finally, the dual acts view can smoothly explain the full range of uses of slurs in a way other views cannot. It explains 'weapons' cases, like

> (20) You cunt!
> (21) You'll never be nothing but a nigger however many degrees you get.

which were problematic for a presuppositional account, as cases in which the slur's 'other' aspect are paramount, and predication of group membership is marginal and uninformative. These cases can seem like nearly inarticulate expressions of rage, and hence as evidence that slurs lack any substantive representational content other than the pure predicative one. But even in these cases, the speaker remains committed to the appropriateness of the slurring perspective. Indeed, the slur is such an effective insult precisely because it reminds the addressee that a significant portion of the culture views him in terms of the perspective, in particular in limning the target's essence, and implicitly threatens to bring the full force of the perspective's associated social practices to bear in putting the addressee in his 'proper' place.

In-group uses among bigots, like

(5) Just get two spics to come clean up the yard for you.

which are problematic for a conventional implicature account (at least, for Potts' expressive version of it), fall at the opposite extreme: here, the speaker need not occurrently *be* in a heightened emotional state at all; she is primarily interested in ordering or suggesting that a certain condition be met. She employs the slur because it reflects how she thinks members of *G* should be thought and felt about, and in particular because she takes the associated perspective to justify the assumption that members of *G* are appropriate candidates for the job.

A dual-acts analysis thus has clear theoretical advantages: on the one hand, it separates pure predication from slurs' 'other' aspect in a way that allows us to respect the intuition of truth-evaluability, specifically the extensional equivalence of slurs and their neutral counterparts. This is the central motivation behind pure taboo views and two-factor views like presupposition and conventional implicature. On the other hand, because it doesn't treat the purely predicative element as the 'only content that counts', in the way that taboo and CI views do, it accounts for the strong intuition that there is something essentially – specifically representationally – wrong with sentences containing slurs, as well as the fact that slurs' 'other' aspect is sometimes sufficiently central to constitute the utterance's main endorsement. This is the central motivation behind Hom's rich semanticism, and is reflected in a less straightforward way in the claims by Dummett, Richard, Hornsby and others that predications of slurs can never be true. The variability in projection data is a reflection, in ordinary discourse, of the tension between these two central motivating intuitions, and of the variation in prominence and centrality of the pure predicative element and the slurring perspective on different occasions of utterance.

These theoretical advantages need to be weighed, however, against the fact that the dual-acts analysis is also a less robust theory than its competitors: it gains the flexibility to explain the range of data by loosening the parameters of what counts as at-issue versus not-at-issue, which also thereby deprives it of the power to make specific predictions in the absence of rich, nuanced data about conversational purposes, background, etc. It is also less theoretically lean and straightforward: instead of the compositional machinery operating exclusively on syntactically determined at-issue content, it allows for mixing of compositional types, at least with respect to attitude and speech reports and negation. Thus, it would be nice, to say the least, if we could uncover some more direct evidence that speakers actually perform a distinct, (typically) secondary speech act of endorsing a slurring perspective, in addition to the predication of group membership, in using a slur.

I don't think I have uncontroversially convincing evidence of this sort, but here is one candidate. Larry Horn (2007, 52) argues for a dual-assertion view of appositive clauses on the grounds that it possible to have insert an overt performative verb into the appositive construction. Thus,

(36) The bailout bill, which I hereby pledge to support, is unconscionable.

clearly performs two distinct speech acts: one of asserting the bailout bill to be unconscionable, and another of pledging to support it. The rational conflict between the speaker doing the latter given her

assertion of the former poses at most a rhetorical or political problem: the utterance itself is coherent, in a way that the purely descriptive conjunction

      (36a) The bailout bill is supportable but unconscionable.

is not. By contrast, Horn says, "It's hard to imagine any examples that could be used to argue" that this dual-speech-act analysis can be extended to "*but, still, even,* and similar particles, to evidential markers, or to epithets or other expressives." Instead, for these expressions Horn endorses "the traditional Fregeo-Gricean line," on which the relevant content is merely 'hinted'.

      However, on closer inspection, I think that Horn's test may actually support a dual-act analysis of slurs. Horn is certainly right that the test cannot be applied directly to any of these expressions; but this might be a purely syntactic limitation on the insertion of overt performatives in the absence of a syntactically isolated clause. If we broaden the test a bit, it appears that one can make one's endorsement of the slurring perspective overt, as for instance in the following:

      (37) And then that cunt – that's right, that's what I'm saying she is, because she is – went and told
            the boss that I'd posted the pictures in the office.

By contrast, the same sentence replacing the slur with its neutral counterpart is infelicitous, because the subject and her gender have already been conversationally established. This suggests, at least, that the use of the slur really does indeed add a further representational commitment beyond pure group membership and a derogatory attitude. Further, even allowing greater leeway in constructing the performative expression, I haven't been able to come up with analogous examples for particles like *but*, *still*, or *yet*, or for evidential markers or pure adjectival expressives like 'damn'.[7]

      That said, however, the modified test doesn't appear to be very reliable. In particular, parallel constructions are felicitous with other 'loaded' phrases that involve substantive classificatory or expressive commitments, but for which a dual-act view is much less plausible, because there is no clear separation between pure predication and evaluation:

      (38) And then this battle—that's right, that's what I'm saying it is, because it is—this battle over
            pension entitlements is going to bankrupt our best-performing, most innovative companies.

Perhaps we should conclude that the modified 'performative insertion test' probes for the presence of some sort of substantive commitment beyond mere referential identification. By itself, this doesn't indicate that two distinct speech acts, referring and interpreting or perspective-taking, are being undertaken: just one rich or 'thick', extension-determining description might be in play. But when we add the two components' separability in complex constructions, then a dual-act analysis becomes more plausible. In any case, we clearly need more, and more reliable, tests for distinguishing among the various species of 'not-at-issue material' that speakers commit themselves to and communicate in virtue of the conventional meaning of the sentences they utter.

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[7] Nor for presuppositions, so far as I can tell.

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