



Slurs and expletives: a case against a general account of expressive meaning[☆]



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ABSTRACT

This paper argues against the case for treating slurs alongside expletives in a general account of expressive meaning (cf Hedger, 2102, 13; Kaplan, 1997; Richard, 2008). Working within a relevance theoretic account of communication (Sperber and Wilson, 1986/95), it argues that expletives (e.g. *damn*) have no descriptive content and pattern with smiles, gestures and tone of voice which are used to trigger procedures for the identification of emotional states. In contrast, slurs have descriptive content – content which provides a means of identifying the group of individuals they are used to target. However, (contra Hom, 2008) the offensive attitude a slur communicates is not part of its encoded content, but is derived from the meta-linguistic knowledge that the word is an offensive means of predicating and referring. This knowledge raises an expectation of relevance which is satisfied only if the hearer attributes the hearer with an indeterminate range of assumptions from the cultural stereotype which his use of the word evokes.

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1. Introduction

1.1. Slurs

The Shorter Oxford English Dictionary defines an epithet as a 'suitable descriptive term'; a word or phrase 'expressing an attribute or quality characteristic of the person or thing mentioned'. However, it also notes that an epithet is an offensive or derogatory expression used of a person or group of persons; a term of abuse. It is this sort of derogatory use which has captured the attention of philosophers of language and linguists working in semantics and pragmatics. Thus in the philosophy of language, attention has centered on epithets used as slurs, for example¹:

[☆] In this paper I shall be using examples of words whose use is offensive; however, I do not intend their use to give offence here. The effects these words induce are part of the phenomenon I am aiming to explain. I give the source of the examples where possible, and in cases of examples borrowed from other philosophical and linguistic literature on the subject I exonerate the author from the responsibility for inducing these effects by indicating that they are cited rather than used. Thus Camp is not to be held responsible for causing offence in (1).

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¹ As I have indicated, slurs are used to derogate members of a group who share a particular identity, where this could be sexual identity, racial identity, or even professional identity (consider the epithet *pig* which is used for members of the police, for example). In this paper I focus on racial epithets; however, the points I make carry over to other types of slurs.

- (1) I'll bet you they hire a nigger and a dyke before they're willing to even consider a white guy. (cited by Camp, 2013)
- (2) We came from the UK for work, mainly. The old man was breaking his back for nothing, just about. Too many Pakis and Poles in the UK now. <http://www.kiwibiker.co.nz/forums/showthread.php/138141-Why-so-many-Poms-in-NZ>
- (3) The horis are having a party next door.

Such epithets are often assumed to have neutral counterparts, or as Hornsby (2001) and Hom (2008) put it, 'non-pejorative equivalents': thus *nigger* is a pejorative word for *African American* or *black*; *dyke* a pejorative word for *lesbian*; *paki* an offensive word for person of SE Asian descent; and *hori* a racist term used in New Zealand for Maori people. However, the point is, of course, that while both terms happen to pick out the same set of individuals, a speaker's decision to produce an utterance containing a slur has consequences for what he is taken to communicate – consequences which are so highly offensive that the utterance may be considered to be a form of hate crime. And the question is how we should accommodate the offence induced by the use of these expressions in a theory of meaning in the light of the fact that it is impossible to reject the point of view associated with a racist epithet by negating the characterization. Thus in (4B) the offensive assumptions communicated by *hori* do not fall under the scope of negation since both (4A) and (4B) present Maoris in an objectionable light:

- (4) A: Karen married a hori.
B: No, she didn't. He's Samoan.

As Camp (2013) points out, we cannot use a word such as *hori* to reject an utterance such as (4A) without being complicit in the original speaker's racism. Some writers (e.g. Blackburn, 1884: 148; Dummett, 2007: 527; Hom, 2008; Williamson, 2009) have argued that speakers can be understood to be dissociating themselves from this racist perspective by making it clear that the use of the slur is attributive (as in (5)) or that the term falls under the scope of meta-linguistic negation (as in (6)):

- (5) Ron Atkinson calls Marcel Desailly a 'lazy nigger' on live TV (YouTube, 24 Feb 2010 <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=olu8HWhcUeU>)
- (6) Yao Ming is Chinese, but he's not a chink (from Hom, 2008)

On this view, Hom's example in (6) would be understood to communicate something like (7):

- (7) The word 'chink' does not apply to anyone who is Chinese.

However, Anderson and Lepore (2013a) argue that not only does this fail to explain why genuine denials of pejorative predicates are offensive, but also that it is not obvious that offence is avoided in utterances such as (5 – 6): 'if the intent is to reject the use of slurs, [utterances such as (5 – 6)] are not recommended. The risk of offense runs high (Anderson and Lepore, 2013a: 30).

In fact, not all racial epithets are equally derogatory, and the derogatory force of some slurs may vary from context to context. Thus there is evidence that in spite of the fact that the epithet *pom* has been ruled as no longer offensive by both the Australian Advertising Board and the New Zealand Broadcasting Standards authority, there are still British immigrants who regard the term as offensive, and there are still New Zealanders who use the term as an insult. At the same time, the term is also used to convey an attitude of good natured endearment, and it has been adopted by members of the British immigrant community themselves (see the website from which (2) is extracted, for example). However, the point is that whether these effects are offensive or affectionate, they survive negation, and this suggests that we must be looking for an account which lies outside truth conditional semantics.

As Anderson and Lepore (2013a) observe, the use of a slur is not necessary for the attribution of offence. On the one hand, offence may be attributed to a speaker who uses an otherwise acceptable term in the context of an utterance containing an expletive, pejorative epithet or prosodic device which has pejorative effects. Thus at the time of writing an earlier version of this paper, it was alleged that a well-known English footballer insulted another footballer by producing the utterance in (8):

- (8) You fucking black cunt. (<http://socqer.com/questions/1478/what-did-john-terry-say-to-anton-ferdinand/>)

Since then the footballer has been tried and found not guilty of racially abusing another player by a Magistrates' Court on the grounds that although he did not deny producing the words in (8), he did not intend racial abuse. At the time of writing, however, he has been found guilty of racial abuse by the Football Association on the grounds that he did utter the words (see <http://www.bbc.co.uk/sport/0/football/19723020>). The point here is that the utterance is offensive because the non-pejorative word *black* is used in an insult where the intention to insult is communicated by the use of expletives *fucking* and *cunt* in an utterance of the form *You Pred P.*² Thus the utterance of *you black footballer* would be odd and certainly would not communicate the same sort of offensive effects.

Moreover, an utterance may be taken as offensive even when it does not contain any linguistic evidence for offensive intent. In (9) the recovery of an offensive attitude from B's response has a pragmatic explanation: in particular, the

² For further discussion of utterances of this form see Potts and Roeper (2006).

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