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# How to do things with slurs: Studies in the way of derogatory words



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## ABSTRACT

This article provides an original account of slurs and how they may be differentially used by in-group and out-group speakers. Slurs are first distinguished from other terms and their role in social interaction is discussed. A new distinction is introduced between three different uses of slurs: the (a) paradigmatic derogatory use, (b) non-paradigmatic derogatory use, and (c) non-derogatory in-group use. I then account for their literal meaning and explain how a family-resemblance conception of category membership can clarify our understanding of the various natural-language uses of slurs, (a)–(c). The focus is restricted primarily to race-based and sex-based slurs used in the context of English speakers, and the article concludes with desiderata to be met by any subsequent analyses of slurs.

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## 1. Introduction

The use of racial and sexist slurs is highly controversial in society and discussions about their use have been widespread (Kennedy, 2002; Brontsema, 2004; Browne, 2007).<sup>1</sup> The use of slurs has often initiated fights and sometimes ended lives (Hoover, 2007; Kiefer, 2010; Fox 10 News, 2010; Fraleigh and Tuman, 2010; BBC News, 2011; Islam, 2011; Siemaszko, 2011; Wilkinson, 2011), and even President Andrew Jackson (1829–1837), described as “fiercely jealous of his honor,” once killed a man in a duel for slurring his wife Rachel (White House, 2009; Beschloss and Sidey, 2009). Perhaps unsurprisingly, then, slurs have recently attracted the attention of linguists and philosophers of language (Kaplan, 1999; Richard, 2008; Williamson, 2009; Anderson and Lepore, 2013). For instance, Jennifer Hornsby has suggested that slurs might count as “hate speech” and so raise questions “about the compatibility of the regulation of [hate] speech with principles of free speech” (2001, p. 129) and Christopher Hom argues that, “the use of an epithet may count as a literal threat, and hence no longer merit freedom of speech protection under the First Amendment” (2008, p. 440). However, despite the fact that the utterance of slurs is derogatory in most contexts, sufficient evidence suggests that slurs are not always or exclusively used to derogate. That is, slurs are frequently picked up and appropriated by the very in-group members that the slur was originally intended to target, which might be done, for instance, as a means for like speakers to strengthen in-group solidarity. So an investigation into the meaning and use of slurs can give us crucial insight into how words can be used with such derogatory impact, and how they can be turned around and

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<sup>1</sup> Earlier drafts of selected sections of this article were awarded several prizes, including the Phi Beta Kappa Elmaleh Essay Prize for the best essay in the social sciences at the University of Pennsylvania for the 2010–2011 academic year and the Elizabeth F. Flower Essay Prize for the best essay in philosophy at the University of Pennsylvania for the 2010–2011 academic year.

appropriated as vehicles of rapport in certain contexts among in-group speakers. Thus, a close analysis of slurs is of interest to the linguist, philosopher of language, legal scholar, and yet others.<sup>2</sup>

## 2. What slurs are

*Slurs* – such as *slut*, *nigger*, *bitch*, and *chink* – are terms that are typically used to derogate certain group members and are largely considered among the most taboo and offensive of all linguistic expressions (Henderson, 2003; Dutton, 2007). Different slurs target members of different groups, with racial slurs primarily targeting people on the basis of race-based features and sexist slurs primarily targeting people on the basis of sex-based features. Typically characterized as a form of “hate speech [...] directed to a group of people, based on a shared characteristic of that group,” slurs are in general considered emotionally charged<sup>3</sup> derogatory terms that target certain group members on the basis of a descriptive feature such as their race or sex (Fraleigh and Tuman, 2010, p. 139). Using slurs towards others is often considered emotionally offensive, and since the term *taboo* is used to “describe the lexicon of offensive emotional language” (Jay, 2009, p. 153), slurs are also characterized as taboo linguistic expressions (Anderson and Lepore, 2013).

A “taboo” is commonly understood as a “ban or inhibition resulting from social custom or aversion,” and as Jay (2009) explains in “The Utility and Ubiquity of Taboo Words,” “Taboo words are sanctioned or restricted on both institutional and individual levels under the assumption that some harm will occur if a taboo word is spoken” (p. 153). Since slurs are largely understood to insult, injure, threaten the face of, or impose a negative identity on those that they target (Allen, 1983; Brown and Levinson, 1987; McGlone and Batchelor, 2003; Rahman, 2012), it has been argued that taboos on their use have been imposed for the purpose of forbidding behavior perceived to be harmful towards certain group members (Allan and Burridge, 2006). The taboo nature of slurring terms will be discussed in further detail in the sections that follow, but the next section will first focus on discussing several important ways in which slurring terms differ from other kinds of terms.

## 3. Distinguishing between descriptive, expressive, and slurring terms

Let us start by taking notice of the fact that slurring terms are distinguishable from other kinds of terms such as descriptive and expressive terms. Examples of descriptive, expressive, and slurring terms are provided below in (1), (2), and (3), respectively:

- (1) S is an *African American*.
- (2) S is a *fucker*.
- (3) S is a *nigger*.

In (1) we have a descriptive term, *African American*, and the term is used to identify some descriptive feature of an individual or group, namely, the description of what race that individual or group is. Other examples of descriptive terms include *woman* and *homosexual* (Random House Dictionary, 2010), and typically when a speaker says, “S is African American,” “S is a woman,” or “S is a homosexual,” the speaker is describing S, or ascribing the descriptive feature *African American*, *woman*, or *homosexual*, respectively, to S. Of the full list of terms available to a speaker, the list of descriptive terms represents only a subset of this full list, since there are also other kinds of terms available to speakers, such as expressive and slurring terms. Yet this list of descriptive terms represents a rich resource for thinkers and speakers to identify objects, individuals, and groups in primarily value or affect neutral terms. Indeed, the nature of scientific discourse and its aim towards an objective articulation of the natural world relies in large part on a commitment to communicate in terms that are value or affect neutral, thereby purging scientific discourse of extraneous subjective contamination (Ayer, 1952; Williams, 1985; Johnston, 1989).<sup>4</sup>

Yet on the other hand, we also have terms that are not value or affect neutral, but are instead rather expressive of value or affect. For example, in *Language, Truth, and Logic*, Ayer (1952) claimed that, “in so far as statements of value [...] are not scientific, they are not in the literal sense significant, but are simply expressions of emotion which can be neither true or false” (pp. 102–103). Potts (2007) argues along similar lines in “The Expressive Dimension,” suggesting that “expressive content is not propositional, that it is distinct from the meanings we typically assign to sentences,” and that “expressives in general manifest this *descriptive ineffability*,” or general lack of descriptive content (p. 177, 176). Yet it is important to notice that these so-called “insignificant” (Ayer, 1952, p. 103) or “descriptively ineffable” (Potts, 2007, p. 176) expressive terms – simply because they do not describe (or “re-present”) the world as descriptive terms do with value-neutral language – are not as a

<sup>2</sup> Note that in this article slurs will be mentioned but not used. Although I have considered not even mentioning such a derogatory term as *nigger* in the first place, I chose it because on the one hand there is a substantive literature on the term upon which to draw to aid in the analysis of slurs in general, and on the other hand, this term highlights the fact that slurs possess a forcefully potent affective component that is clearly a key aspect to their employment.

<sup>3</sup> Or at least contempt-laden, as all derogatory uses need not be highly emotional.

<sup>4</sup> Note that the terms *concept* and *term* are often used synonymously across the literature in linguistics, philosophy, and cognitive science, with “conceptual thought” being largely characterized as “language-like thought” (Schneider and Katz, 2011; see also Harman, 1973; Fodor, 1975), so for the purposes of the present analysis I will treat the terms as largely synonymous.

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