



ELSEVIER

Contents lists available at SciVerse ScienceDirect

## Language &amp; Communication

journal homepage: [www.elsevier.com/locate/langcom](http://www.elsevier.com/locate/langcom)

# Meaning and racial slurs: Derogatory epithets and the semantics/pragmatics interface

Joseph A. Hedger<sup>1</sup>

Department of Philosophy, Syracuse University, 541 Hall of Languages, Syracuse, NY 13244-1170, USA

## ARTICLE INFO

## Article history:

Available online 5 June 2013

## Keywords:

Philosophy of language  
Slurs  
Semantics  
Pragmatics  
Natural language semantics  
Conventional implicature

## ABSTRACT

The semantics of racial slurs has recently become a locus of debate amongst philosophers. While everyone agrees that slurs are offensive, there is disagreement about the linguistic mechanism responsible for this offensiveness. This paper places the debate about racial slurs into the context of a larger issue concerning the interface between semantics and pragmatics, and argues that even on minimalist assumptions, the offensiveness of slur words is more plausibly due to their semantic content rather than any pragmatic mechanism (including conventional implicature). Finally, I note that slurs make a good test case for expanding our semantic theories beyond the truth conditional tradition of Frege, which will be necessary in order to broaden the types of expressions handled by semantic theories.

© 2013 Elsevier Ltd. All rights reserved.

## 1. Introduction

It is a standard move in philosophy to argue that part of the meaning of particular groups of expressions is due to the pragmatics rather than the semantics of those expressions. For instance, as Kevan Edwards (2010) notes, part of the Direct Reference tradition in the philosophy of language involves the strategy of pushing messiness over into pragmatics whenever possible, in order to keep a neat, orderly, and austere semantics. This notion of semantics better coheres with the Kripke (1980) intuitions, as Edwards points out. A classic case study in this methodology is Kripke (1977), where he argues against a semantic ambiguity interpretation of Donnellan (1966)'s referential and attributive uses of definite descriptions, and concludes that this feature is part of pragmatics, or speaker meaning, rather than semantic meaning.

A similar move is made by Stalnaker (1999; chapters 1 and 2). Strawson (1950) argues against Russell's (1905) theory of definite descriptions by claiming that a statement containing an empty definite description (i.e. one which has no referent) uttered "out of the blue" would intuitively not be considered false as Russell's analysis yields. Instead, it would lead to a sort of puzzlement on the part of the audience, which Strawson (1952) argues is due to the failure of a presupposition that a definite description which occurs as the logical subject of a sentence should refer to an object.<sup>2</sup> Without the satisfaction of this presupposition, the statement fails to express a proposition, and so is neither true nor false.<sup>3</sup> Stalnaker (1999) responds that presupposition of this sort belongs to the pragmatic meaning of such sentences, and is better understood as involving conversational maxims and background knowledge of the conversational participants (à la Grice) rather than having to muddy up semantics with so-called "gappy" propositions.<sup>4</sup> Other cases noted by King and Stanley (2005) include avoiding contextualism

<sup>1</sup> Fax: +1 (315) 443 5675.

E-mail address: [jhedger@syr.edu](mailto:jhedger@syr.edu)

<sup>2</sup> Strawson further disagrees with Russell's claim that the object satisfying the definite description needs to be *unique*, but that needn't concern us here.

<sup>3</sup> Geach (1950) makes the same point.

<sup>4</sup> Indeed, Grice (1989, *Essay 17*) made this same move in 1970, by arguing that what Strawson attributes to semantic presupposition is better explained in terms of conversational implicature, which is a pragmatic feature of the type of utterance. (The Stalnaker papers were first published in 1970 and 1974.)

concerning 'know' and internalism concerning reasons in ethics by arguing that the facts which support each of these views are a product of the *use* rather than the *semantic meaning* of utterances.

There are philosophers on both sides of these debates, but in general my own sympathies lie with the side which is conservative regarding semantic content (roughly coinciding with what might be called the Direct Reference tradition in the philosophy of language). The general moral to be drawn from these case studies is what Paul Grice (1989) calls a *Modified Occam's Razor* (pp. 47–49). Basically, the idea is not to multiply semantic meaning (including ambiguities) beyond necessity. As Edwards (2010) and others recognize, following this general principle has the pragmatic advantage of making our semantic theories more simple, precise, and theoretically tractable. In a word, it helps us to avoid *messiness* in our semantic theories and pushes such complications over into the area of pragmatics, which we already know is going to be vastly complicated. One disadvantage to this method, not often discussed, is that it writes checks that our pragmatic theory must eventually cash. Still, the benefits of this methodology are well worth this cost, and so throughout this paper I shall try to adhere to this procedure.

Racial, ethnic, and religious slurs have recently become a locus of debate for philosophers of language (see e.g. Anderson and Lepore, 2013; Hom, 2008; Hornsby, 2001; Richard, 2008; Williamson, 2009). The issue of the meaning of racial slurs and the issue of where to draw the line between semantics and pragmatics intersect in some interesting ways. Of course, everyone in this debate agrees that racial slurs are offensive. A key disagreement, which this paper will address, is whether this offensiveness is better understood as part of the semantic content of slur words or whether it is instead part of their pragmatic meaning. I will argue that the offensiveness of slur words is part of the semantic meaning of those expressions. I want to urge that even accepting the semantic minimalist methodology outlined above, there are very strong reasons to come to this conclusion. A key difference between the two kinds of views concerns whether a racial slur has any effect on the truth conditions of statements which include them as a constituent.

Although my ultimate goal is that the claim argued for in this paper (viz. that the offensiveness of racial slurs should be considered part of their semantic content) can be accepted independently of my overall view concerning the semantics of slur words, I will occasionally refer to the sketch of a semantic theory found in Hedger (2012). In that paper, I make use of Kaplan (2005)'s distinction between two different kinds of semantic content, *descriptive* and *expressive*. Roughly, descriptive content describes or represents the world as being some way or another, and hence can be true or false. Expressive content displays the attitude of the speaker, and although it can be genuine or not, it is not the sort of content which can be either true or false.<sup>5</sup> I argue that derogatory epithets can be divided into two distinct classes—those which contain both descriptive and expressive content and those which contain purely expressive content. Slurs express contempt but don't say anything about or describe their targets, and thus are composed of purely expressive content. I offer some further considerations in support of this view in Section 5. In this paper my subject will be paradigmatic slur words, and so I set aside issues arising with other derogatory terms or with appropriated slurs (i.e. those used to address the "insiders" of certain groups).

## 2. Semantics and pragmatics

Roughly, semantics concerns the linguistic meaning of strings of language, and pragmatics concerns the ways in which speakers use those strings (e.g. Szabó, 2006). As Saul (2002) notes, Grice's (1989) basic distinction between *what is said* (semantics) and *what is implicated* or *what is meant* (pragmatics) has an immediate intuitive appeal. Grice's (1961) example of a letter of recommendation makes this distinction clear and immediately understandable (paraphrased from pp. 129–130):

A philosophy professor asked to write a letter of recommendation for one of his students (named Jones) writes, "Jones has beautiful handwriting and his English is grammatical." Although the professor's assertion was complimentary and regarded Jones's handwriting and grammar, the obvious conclusion to be drawn from these remarks is that Jones is no good at philosophy. This is, of course, because letters of recommendation are supposed to be praiseworthy, but here the professor did not praise Jones's abilities at philosophy, but instead praised his handwriting, which is much less relevant for the job. What the professor said (i.e. the semantic content of his speech act) was that Jones has beautiful handwriting and that his English is grammatical, but what the professor implicated (i.e. the pragmatic content of his speech act) was that Jones is not good at philosophy and doesn't deserve the position. It is clear that although the professor implicated that Jones is no good at philosophy, he never explicitly said this.

<sup>5</sup> An anonymous referee worries that my description conflates Kaplan's distinction between descriptive and expressive semantic content with the ethical non-cognitivist descriptive/expressive distinction, and that it is only according to the latter view that expressive content is not truth-apt. Although the issue is complicated by the fact that Kaplan (2005) suggests an alternate view of an inference's validity in terms of "information delimitation" rather than truth preservation, he is quite clear that e.g. the expression 'ouch' by itself "lacks a truth value" (p. 16). Kaplan's idea is that an expression is "expressively correct" just in case it displays what is the case, which is usually an attitude of the speaker. In his example, the sentence "That damn Kaplan was promoted" is descriptively correct just in case Kaplan was promoted, and expressively correct just in case the derogatory attitude towards Kaplan displayed by 'damn' is genuinely held by the speaker. If the statement is both descriptively correct and expressively correct, then it is what Kaplan calls "true-plus." (See Williamson 2009, especially footnote 17, for criticisms of Kaplan's notion of information delimitation.) Kaplan's view about slurs (confirmed by personal communication) is that they contain both descriptive and expressive content, and hence most (if not all) statements containing slurs may potentially be true-plus. In my view, slurs contain only expressive content (and so mirror Kaplan 2005's analysis of 'damn,' 'frigging' and 'bastard'). See Hedger (2012) for more on the difference between our views, and criticisms of Kaplan's account of slurs. I don't have a worked out theory of an evaluative dimension for expressive content (which is needed since truth doesn't apply), but I would favor an account in terms of the *appropriateness* of the attitude displayed rather than Kaplan's idea that a language string is expressively correct just in case the attitude displayed is genuinely held by the speaker.

Download English Version:

<https://daneshyari.com/en/article/10460904>

Download Persian Version:

<https://daneshyari.com/article/10460904>

[Daneshyari.com](https://daneshyari.com)