



# The semantics of slurs: A refutation of coreferentialism



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## HIGHLIGHTS

- Reviews the coreferentialist assumption that slurs and descriptors are coreferential expressions with the same extension.
- Considers four sources of empirical evidence showing that slurs and descriptors are not coreferential expressions with the same extension.
- Argues that since slurs and descriptors differ in their extension they thereby differ in their meaning or content also.
- Introduces the notion of a *conceptual anchor* in order to adequately account for the relationship between slurs and descriptors.
- Outlines a family resemblance account of slurs and explains its merits over competing proposals.

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## ABSTRACT

Coreferentialism refers to the common assumption in the literature that slurs (e.g. *faggot*) and descriptors (e.g. *male homosexual*) are coreferential expressions with precisely the same extension. For instance, Vallee (2014) recently writes that “If *S* is an ethnic slur in language *L*, then there is a non-derogatory expression *G* in *L* such that *G* and *S* have the same extension” (p. 79). The non-derogatory expression *G* is commonly considered the *nonpejorative correlate* (NPC) of the slur expression *S* (Hom, 2008) and it is widely thought that every *S* has a coreferring *G* that possesses precisely the same extension. Yet here I argue against this widespread assumption by first briefly introducing what slurs are and then considering four sources of supporting evidence showing that slurs and descriptors are in fact *not* coreferential expressions with precisely the same extension. I argue that since slurs and descriptors differ in their extension they thereby differ in their meaning or content also. This article additionally introduces the notion of a *conceptual anchor* in order to adequately account for the relationship between slurs and descriptors actually evidenced in the empirical data, and further considers the inadequacy of common dictionary definitions of slurs. This article therefore contributes to the literature on slurs by demonstrating that previous accounts operating on the assumption that slurs and descriptors are coreferential expressions with the same extension, and that they thereby have the same meaning or content, are inconsistent with empirical data and that an alternative account in accord with Croom (2011, 2013a, 2014b) better fits the facts concerning their actual meaning and use.

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## 1. Introduction

The humanities and social sciences have recently witnessed an explosion of fascinating new research on slurs and derogatory language (see for instance Cepollaro, 2015; Croom, 2015a,b; Jay and Jay, 2015; Beaton and Washington, 2014; Blakemore, 2014; Cupkovic, 2014; Jackson, 2014; O’Dea et al., 2014; Saucier et al., 2014; Weissbrod, 2014; Embrick and Henricks, 2013) and one widely held assumption in the literature – call it *coreferentialism* – is that slurs (e.g. *faggot*) and descriptors (e.g. *male homosexual*) are coreferential expressions with precisely the same extension (see for instance Dummett, 1973, p. 454; Hornsby, 2001, p. 129; Williamson,

2003, p. 261; Whiting, 2007, p. 192; Whiting, 2008, p. 385; McCready, 2010, p. 5, 9; Anderson and Lepore, 2013a, p. 26–27; Anderson and Lepore, 2013b, p. 351; Vallee, 2014, p. 79). For instance, Vallee (2014) recently writes in “Slurring and Common Knowledge of Ordinary Language” that “If *S* is an ethnic slur in language *L*, then there is a non-derogatory expression *G* in *L* such that *G* and *S* have the same extension” (p. 79, my emphasis).<sup>1</sup> The non-derogatory expression *G* is commonly considered the *nonpejorative correlate* (NPC) of the slur expression *S* (Hom, 2008) and it is widely thought that every *S* has a coreferring *G* that possesses precisely the same extension. Yet here I argue against this widespread assumption by

<sup>1</sup> Quine (1951) explained in “Two Dogmas of Empiricism” that “The class of all entities of which a general term is true is called the *extension* of the term” (p. 21).

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first briefly introducing what slurs are and then considering four sources of supporting evidence showing that slurs and descriptors are in fact *not* coreferential expressions with precisely the same extension. I argue that since slurs and descriptors differ in their extension they thereby differ in their meaning or content also. This article additionally introduces the notion of a *conceptual anchor* in order to adequately account for the relationship between slurs and descriptors actually evidenced in the empirical data, and further considers the inadequacy of common dictionary definitions of slurs. This article therefore contributes to the literature on slurs by demonstrating that previous accounts operating on the assumption that slurs and descriptors are coreferential expressions with the same extension, and that they thereby have the same meaning or content, are inconsistent with empirical data and that an alternative account in accord with Croom (2011, 2013a, 2014b) better fits the facts concerning their actual meaning and use.<sup>2</sup>

## 2. Some basic features of slurs and their use

Slurs such as *nigger*, *cracker*, *kike*, *chink*, and *slut* are linguistic expressions that are primarily used and understood to derogate certain group members on the basis of their descriptive attributes (such as their race or sex) and expressions of this kind have been considered by many to pack some of the nastiest punches natural language has to offer. In discussions concerning the history and use of various race-directed and sex-directed slurs, Lemon (2013) explains that the slur *nigger* is a “dark, degrading hateful insult for African Americans”, Foreman (2013) explains that the slur *cracker* “is a demeaning, bigoted term [...] a sharp racial insult that resonates with white southerners [...] offensive and evidence of ill intent”, Verna et al. (2007) explain that the slur *kike* is “a term of abuse for Jews” whereas the slur *chink* is “a term of abuse for Asians” (p. 468), and Blackwell (2004) explains that the slur “*slut*”, a charge easy to level and hard to disprove, is an ambivalent emblem of women’s perception of their sexuality” (p. 141, my emphasis). As Anderson and Lepore (2013a) write, there are a wide variety of slurs “that target groups on the basis of race (‘nigger’), nationality (‘kraut’), religion (‘kike’), gender (‘bitch’), sexual orientation (‘fag’), immigrant status (‘wetback’) and sundry other demographics” (p. 25). So one basic fact about slurs is that an application of a particular slur in context occurs based on considerations of its systematic differential application-conditions, which concern descriptive attributes of targets such as their racial or sexual identity.

Another basic fact about slurs is that they are often considered to be among the most offensive of all linguistic expressions. The racial slur *nigger*, for instance, is commonly identified as “one of the most racially offensive words in the language” (Oxford English Dictionary, 2014) and Christopher Darden has popularly characterized the slur as the “filthiest, dirtiest, nastiest word in the English language” (Kennedy, 2002, p. 23; Knowles, 2009). Fitten (1993) even proposes that slurs should be considered “fighting words” since they have often been used to initiate violence and carry out hate crimes, and Jeshion (2013a) further suggests that “Slurring terms are used as *weapons* in those contexts in which they are used to derogate an individual or group of individuals to whom the slur is applied or the socially relevant group that the slur references” (p. 237, my emphasis). In discussions concerning the history and use of various slurs, Cole (2013) has also discussed how slurs have been used to initiate fights in hockey, McIntyre (2013) has discussed how slurs have been used to initiate fights in football, and Hoover (2007) has discussed how slurs have been used to initiate fights on

college campuses. In yet other discussions concerning the history and use of various slurs, Islam (2011) discusses how a 7-year old boy killed one of his classmates for targeting him with a homophobic slur, Reifowitz (2013) discusses how the slur *nigger* was the last word thousands of African Americans heard before they were savagely lynched by white supremacists, and Kemp (2014) discusses how 4 perpetrators in Philadelphia were recently charged for kidnapping, assaulting, and forcibly tattooing racial slurs on the arms of their victim. Resultantly, prohibitions against slurs are often so strong now that Craver (1994) even reports a case where one man was fired from his job for merely *listening* to a radio station show that had used slurs in conversation. So another basic fact about slurs is that they are among the most potentially offensive expressions that natural language has to offer.

## 3. The traditional assumption that slurs and descriptors are coreferential expressions

Having now briefly reviewed some basic facts about slurs in the previous section, this section will proceed to critically assess the widespread assumption that slurs (e.g. *faggot*) and descriptors (e.g. *male homosexual*) are coreferential expressions with precisely the same extension (Dummett, 1973, p. 454; Hornsby, 2001, p. 129; Williamson, 2003, p. 261; Whiting, 2007, p. 192; Whiting, 2008, p. 385; McCready, 2010, p. 5, 9; Anderson and Lepore, 2013a, p. 26–27; Anderson and Lepore, 2013b, p. 351; Vallee, 2014, p. 79). In an early and influential discussion involving the slur *boche*, for instance, Dummett (1973) proposed that “The condition for applying the term to someone is that he is of German nationality; the consequences of its application are that he is barbarous and more prone to cruelty than other Europeans”, and that “We should envisage the connections in both directions as sufficiently tight as to be involved in the very meaning of the word: neither could be severed without altering its meaning” (p. 454, my emphasis). Williamson (2003) similarly argued that the slur “‘Boche’ has the same reference as ‘German’” (p. 261) and that therefore “the differences between ‘Boche’ and ‘German’ apparently play no role in determining reference, and so make no difference to the way in which the terms contribute to the truth-conditions of sentences in which they occur” (p. 261, my emphasis; see also Williamson, 2009, 2010). Whiting (2008) also argues that “the meaning of [the slur] ‘Boche’ is given by whatever inferential rules govern (and thereby determine the meaning of) ‘German’” (p. 385) while Vallee (2014) further claims that “the extension of ‘German’ is the set of German people, as is the extension of ‘boche’, and the extension of ‘Chinese’ is the set of Chinese people, as is the extension of ‘chink’” (p. 79). Luvel Anderson and Ernie Lepore have accordingly considered the expressions *boche* and *German*, and the expressions *chink* and *Chinese*, as examples of “slurs and their neutral counterparts” (2013a, p. 26–27, my emphasis) which they consider to be “co-referential expressions for the same group” (2013b, p. 351, my emphasis).<sup>3</sup> Other examples of “co-referential expressions for the same group” have also been suggested by Whiting (2007) and include “the pairs ‘faggot’ and ‘male homosexual’, ‘nigger’ and ‘black’ and ‘Kike’ and ‘Jew’” (p. 192). McCready (2010) similarly suggests that “Kraut is a pejorative term for German people on its nominal use” and that “the expressed content of Kraut is roughly that German people are bad” (p. 5, 9).

Given that two expressions  $\alpha_1$  and  $\alpha_2$  are commonly considered *coreferring expressions* just in case  $\text{referent}(\alpha_1) = \text{referent}(\alpha_2)$  for the expressions  $\alpha_1$  and  $\alpha_2$  (van Deemter and Kibble, 2000, p.

<sup>2</sup> For proposed adequacy conditions for accounts of slurs see for instance Hom, 2008, p. 426; Croom, 2011, p. 355; Croom, 2013a, p. 200.

<sup>3</sup> Safir (2005) suggests in “Abandoning Coreference” that the “intended coreference involves picking out the same referent, the same extension in the world of discourse” (p. 629).

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