



Slurs and lexical presumption



William G. Lycan

University of North Carolina, USA

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ABSTRACT

Grice's cryptic notion of "conventional implicature" has been developed in a number of different ways. This paper deploys the simplest version, Lycan's (1984) notion of "lexical presumption," and argues that slurs and other pejorative expressions have normal truth-conditional content plus the most obvious extra implicatures. The paper then addresses and rebuts objections to "conventional implicature" accounts that have been made in the literature, particularly those which focus on non-offensive uses of slurs.

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1. Damn!¹

1. What does *damn* mean when thus uttered in isolation? Perhaps a linguist could show that there is a tacit direct object—we do *nearly* equivalently say "Damn it"—and possibly that there is a higher subject, "God" (though the latter idea is refuted syntactically by Quang (1971)). The utterance would further be a hortatory subjunctive, "*Let/may* God damn [whatever]." But that is not the normal use; sincere utterers of "Damn" need not believe in God, nor urge that He actually condemn a particular object to Hell. David Lewis (1972, p. 209) proposed to analyze "Hooray" as "I cheer X," but that was contrived at best; absent syntactic evidence to the contrary, when I shout "Hooray" I have not either asserted a proposition or made any other performative utterance having propositional structure.

Unlike *hooray*, *ouch*, *good gracious*, *oh, dear*, *amen*, or *ha ha*, *damn* can also function as an adjective contributing syntactically to a containing sentence: "That damn cat has pooped in the roasting pan"; "You haven't done a damn thing."² In such sentences *damn* is not merely an interjection; "Susan consulted—damn!—a fortune-teller" is fine, but *"Susan consulted damn a fortune-teller" is ungrammatical. Likewise for *goddam*, and as before, "That goddam cat has pooped..." does not (even metaphorically) mean "That cat has been condemned to Hell by God and has pooped...." *Goddam* is expressive only, despite its quite determinate syntactic role. The same applies to *fucking*; statistically few uses of that word mean anything about sex acts, or indeed anything that contributes to a truth condition.

Following David Kaplan (2004), I shall call such linguistic items—that is, those which are words of particular languages and have syntactic properties but do not seem to contribute to truth-conditional or propositional meaning but only express

E-mail address: ujanel@email.unc.edu.

¹ Alert readers will have recognized this opening as an allusion to Dorothy Sayers' first novel, which famously began: "'Oh, damn!' said Lord Peter Wimsey at Piccadilly Circus" (often misquoted as just "'Damn!' said Lord Peter Wimsey").

² But not "I don't give a damn" or "It doesn't matter a damn." In those, "damn" is a misspelling of *dam*, a noun, meaning an otherwise useless wad of wet paper or the like used to plug a hole in a metal item being repaired by a tinker.

I conjecture that *damn* as adjective is a shortening of *dammed*, a participle.

things— “expressives.” They form a surprisingly wide and diverse category, and the term is not felicitous for all of its sub-categories. Of recent interest, of course, are slurs and other pejorative expressions.

It must not be simply assumed that slurs are a special case of expressives; we shall consider arguments against that assumption in section 5 below. But I shall begin my exposition with some further words on expressives, in order to introduce my central explanatory notion.

2. I here propose a view according to which expressives work by a particular type of conventional implicature. Other such views have been put forward, as by Potts (2005), Williamson (2009, 2010), McCready (2010), Whiting (2013), and Deigan (2013), but, understandably, those authors’ ideas of “conventional implicature” are not all the same and do not work in the same ways. –Understandably, because Grice (1975, pp. 44–45) introduced the term without definition in one short paragraph, and used an inappropriate or at least confusing example³; the rest of us have each made of it what we will.

What I have made of it I call “lexical presumption.” Here are some data of the sort that originally motivated my notion.

- (1) a. Jane is a sloppy housekeeper and she doesn’t take baths either.
b. ?!Jane is a neat housekeeper and she doesn’t take baths either. [Lakoff (1969)⁴]
- (2) a. Jane has just succeeded in proving Goldbach’s Conjecture, and her husband is very brilliant too.
b. ?!Jane just added 2 and 2 and got 6, and her husband is very brilliant too.
- (3) a. Jane considered going to the dentist, but decided to enjoy her day off instead.
b. ?!Jane considered taking a pleasant ride through the countryside, having a wonderful dinner, and seeing a movie, but decided to enjoy her day off instead.
- (4) a. Jane proved Goldbach’s Conjecture and she’s smart.
b. ?!Jane proved Goldbach’s Conjecture {but / and yet} she’s smart.
- (5) a. Jane is very lucky and very happy.
b. ?! Although Jane is very lucky, she is very happy.
- (6) a. Mr. Blifil is sober.
b. ?!Even Mr. Blifil is sober. [Entirely inappropriate when Blifil is the last person one expected to be not sober.⁵]
- (7) a. Who is Jane?
b. ?!Who is this pebble?

In each case except (7), what is actually said remains constant, but there is an unmistakable difference in implication. Nor is the implication merely a matter of conversational implicature or of relevance–theoretic adjustment, for it is noncancellable in Grice’s sense:

- (8) *Jane has succeeded in proving Goldbach’s Conjecture, and her husband is very brilliant too; you have to be pretty stupid to prove things.
- (9) *Jane considered taking a pleasant ride, but decided to take a pleasant ride instead.
- (10) *Jane knows that Goldbach’s Conjecture is true but she’s smart; of course learning things like Goldbach’s Conjecture means you are smart.
- (11) *Although Jane is very lucky, she is very happy; mind you, all lucky people are happy.
- (12) *Even Mr. Blifil was sober; he’s a famous teetotaler.
- (13) *Who broke this vase?—a falling lamp, I bet.

3. What explains these noncancellable but seemingly not truth–conditional implications? In each case, what seems to be doing the work is the choice of a certain *word*: *either*, *too*, *instead*, *but*, *yet*, *although*, *even*, *who*. That word cannot be used unless a certain factual assumption is made. If the assumption is not granted, the choice of word is ruled inappropriate. Those words, over and above their truth–conditional meanings, seem to have the sole function of generating their respective implications. As Frege (1892/1966) says: “Subsidiary clauses beginning with ‘although’ also express complete thoughts. This conjunction actually has no sense and does not change the sense of the clause but only illuminates it in a peculiar fashion” (p. 73).⁶

³ “He is an Englishman; he is therefore brave,” the alleged implicature being carried by “therefore.” But “therefore” makes a straightforwardly truth–conditional contribution; it means “for that reason.” —Actually that is far too simple; see Neta (2013).

⁴ Lakoff offered this and related data in support of his claim that a sentence may be *syntactically* deviant depending on contingent ways the world might be. (AUTHOR REF) argued that that is true only in a narrow sense, and that it cannot be used to defend the idea of semantic presupposition.

⁵ Cf. Dudman (1984), “Even Grannie is sober.” Actually I myself have argued (AUTHOR REF) that “even” makes a substantive truth–conditional contribution, but this remains a minority position; I here insincerely assume the majority view.

⁶ Frege continues: “We could indeed replace the concessive clause without harm to the truth of the whole by another of the same truth value; but the light in which the clause is placed by the conjunction might then easily appear unsuitable, as if a song with a sad subject were to be sung in a lively fashion.” A lovely analogy, but inaccurate; the lively singing would be bad interpretation and bad style, but the use of “although” when there is no relevant tension is flatly incorrect.

And cf. Frege’s remarks on “tone.” He contrasts “cur” with “dog” (1979), though they have not only the same reference but the same sense.

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