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# The semantics of slurs: a refutation of pure expressivism

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ABSTRACT

In several recent contributions to the growing literature on slurs, Hedger (2012, 2013) draws upon Kaplan's (1999) distinction between descriptive and expressive content to argue that slurs are expressions with purely expressive content. The distinction between descriptive and expressive content and the view that slurs are expressions with purely expressive content has been widely acknowledged in prior work (e.g., Kaplan, 1999; Kratzer, 1999; Potts, 2003, 2005, 2007; Potts and Kawahara, 2004; Pullum and Rawlins, 2007; Potts et al., 2009), and Hedger (2012, 2013) aims to contribute to this tradition of scholarship by offering novel arguments in support of his "pure expressivist" account of slurs (henceforth PE). But the account that PE offers is explanatorily inadequate, resting on suspect a priori intuitions which also commit one to denying many basic facts about slurs, such as that slurs largely display systematic differential application and that slurs can be used non-offensively between in-group speakers. In this article I provide clear reasons for rejecting PE, arguing particularly against Hedger (2012, 2013) as one of PE's most explicit and recent proponents. In showing that PE is inadequate in at least 11 ways, I argue in favor of a mixed or hybrid approach.



## 1. Introduction

In several recent contributions to the growing literature on slurs, Hedger (2012, 2013) draws upon Kaplan's (1999) distinction between descriptive and expressive content to argue that slurs are expressions with purely expressive content. The distinction between descriptive and expressive content and the view that slurs are expressions with purely expressive content has been widely acknowledged in prior work (e.g., Kaplan, 1999; Kratzer, 1999; Potts, 2003, 2005, 2007; Potts and Kawahara, 2004; Pullum and Rawlins, 2007; Potts et al., 2009), and Hedger (2012, 2013) aims to contribute to this tradition of scholarship by offering novel arguments in support of his "pure expressivist" account of slurs (henceforth PE). But the account that PE offers is explanatorily inadequate, resting on suspect a priori intuitions which also commit one to denying many basic facts about slurs, such as that slurs largely display systematic differential application and that slurs can be used non-offensively between in-group speakers. In this article I provide clear reasons for rejecting PE, arguing particularly against Hedger (2012, 2013) as one of PE's most explicit and recent proponents. In showing that PE is inadequate in at least 11 ways, I argue in favor of a mixed or hybrid approach.

Towards this end the present article will proceed as follows. Section 2 introduces what slurs are along with several basic facts that an adequate framework for slurs ought to account for. Section 3 reviews the purely expressive account of slurs (PE) most recently and explicitly advocated by Hedger (2012, 2013) and inspects how the projection behavior of slurs differs markedly from expressions with purely descriptive content. Next we turn to review three key cases Hedger (2012, 2013) considers in support of PE's claim that slurs are expressions with purely expressive content, while Section 4 provides a

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critical evaluation of these cases. In Section 5 we then look at several recent empirical considerations on the non-derogatory use of slurs, while Section 6 concludes. But let us now start from the beginning and first introduce what slurs are.

## 2. Slurs and some basics for an account

Slurs, such as *nigger* or *faggot*, are expressions that are often used to derogate certain group members and have been considered among the most offensive of all linguistic expressions (Kennedy, 2002, p. 23; Anderson and Lepore, 2013, p. 25). Often considered a form of "hate speech [...] directed to a group of people, based on a shared characteristic of that group," slurs are generally considered derogatory expressions that target certain group members on the basis of descriptive features such as their racial or sexual identity, with racial slurs such as *nigger* primarily targeting people on the basis of race-based features and sexual slurs such as *faggot* primarily targeting people on the basis of sex-based features (Fraleigh and Tuman, 2010, p. 139). Himma (2002), for example, suggests that a linguistically adequate dictionary might "define "nigger" as "a slur that is wrongfully used to oppress black persons on the basis of race [... and] define "faggot" as "a term wrongfully used to oppress male homosexuals on the basis of sexual preference" (p. 518, 521, fn. 23). So an application of a particular slur in context does not occur at random, but instead based on considerations of their systematic differential application–conditions, which concern descriptive features of targets such as their racial or sexual identity. This is not only how speakers are able to systematically distinguish between relatively broader categories of slurs (e.g., the racial slur *nigger* from the sexual slur *faggot*) but further how speakers are able to systematically distinguish between relatively narrower categories of slurs (e.g., the racial slur *nigger* from the racial slur *gook*) within those broader categories. That there are in fact different types of slurs applied differentially towards targets is noncontroversial – as Anderson and Lepore (2013) rightly point out, there in fact exists a large 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) – and accounting for this basic fact has been outlined in prior work as one of several conditions to be met by any explanatorily adequate account of slurs.[1]

Another basic fact about slurs that must be accounted for is their ability to pack some of the nastiest punches natural language has to offer.[2] Since slurs of any type seem capable of greatly offending most people, the question of how slurs are able to do this across such a diverse range of contexts (e.g., while being embedded within a question, under negation, or as the antecedent of a conditional) provides the linguist and philosopher alike with a substantive theoretical challenge. Clearly such an important challenge must be carried out with responsibility and without unsupported a priori prejudice, as a thorough understanding of how slurs are actually used may have significant real-world implications for how issues regarding freedom of speech and freedom from oppression are practically adjudicated in our society.

Perhaps the most salient feature about slurs is their ability to offend, as this has been a central point of focus in prior work on slurs (e.g., Anderson and Lepore, 2013, p. 25; Hedger, 2012, p. 74). The potential offensiveness of slurs is not only evidenced by the fact that their use has often initiated violence and ended in homicide (Hoover, 2007; Kiefer, 2010; Fox 10 News, 2010; Islam, 2011; Wilkinson, 2011), but is further evidenced by more straightforwardly linguistic considerations, such as through an analysis of their projection behavior across a diverse range of linguistic contexts. The projection behavior of slurs has been investigated at great length in prior work (Potts, 2007; Hom, 2008, 2010; Williamson, 2009; McCready, 2010; Croom, 2011, 2013; Hom, 2012; Anderson and Lepore, 2013; Hay, 2012; Whiting, 2013), and Hedger (2012, 2013) rightly draws upon considerations of this kind to argue that the projection behavior of slurs differs markedly from that of expressions with purely descriptive content. Hedger (2012, 2013) also draws upon these considerations to ground his defense of PE, which, as I show in Section 4, is explanatorily inadequate and commits one to several untenable conclusions. As it will be made clear in Section 4, the endorsement of PE by Hedger (2012, 2013) along with several others before (Kaplan, 1999; Kratzer, 1999; Potts, 2003, 2005, 2007; Potts and Kawahara, 2004; Pullum and Rawlins, 2007; Potts et al., 2009) in fact rests on suspect a priori intuitions that commit one to denying many basic facts about slurs, such as that slurs largely display systematic differential application (e.g., the slurs *gook* and *slut* are differentially applied towards different targets, with this differential application being systematic) and that slurs can be used non-offensively between in-group speakers. But before discussing reasons for rejecting PE, let us first briefly review it in some detail along with its explanatory merits.

## 3. Slurs and pure expressivism

In his article "The Semantics of Racial Slurs," Hedger (2012) follows a rich tradition of linguists and philosophers of language that have drawn upon Kaplan's (1999) distinction between *descriptive* and *expressive* content to aid them in their analyses of linguistic expressions (Kratzer, 1999; Potts, 2003, 2005, 2007; Potts and Kawahara, 2004; Pullum and Rawlins, 2007; Potts et al., 2009). The distinction between descriptive and expressive content became well acknowledged as research on expressive content became increasingly fashionable, which was no doubt partly owed to the publication of *The Logic of Conventional Implicature*, where Potts (2005) developed a multidimensional logic $\mathscr{L}_{\mathrm{CI}}$ for handling conventional implicatures

[1] See adequacy condition 2 of 6 in Croom (2011, p. 355), and adequacy condition 2 of 7 in Croom (2013, p. 200).

[2] See adequacy condition 1 of 6 in Hom (2008, p. 426). See also adequacy condition 3 of 6 in Croom (2011, p. 355), and adequacy condition 3 of 7 in Croom (2013, p. 200).