

# When evaluation changes – An echoic account of appropriation and variability



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## Abstract

In this paper I present a uniform account of two phenomena considered as independent so far: Appropriation of slurs and Variability of thick terms. My analysis relies on the notion of “echoic use” of language, proposed by Relevance Theory and employed by Bianchi (2014) to account for Appropriation. I argue that such echoic approach does not only explain Appropriation of slurs, as Bianchi claims, but it also accounts for Variability of thick terms. Moreover, I show how the relevance-theoretic distinction between merely attributive and echoic uses of language sheds light on the crucial distinction between the two often conflated phenomena of ‘suspension’ and ‘reversal’ of the evaluative content of slurs and thick terms. In addition to accounting for Appropriation and Variability, my proposal has the following theoretical outcome for the theory of thick terms: if variability cases are in fact derivative or parasitic uses of language, they do not challenge anymore the claim that the relation between thick terms and the associated evaluation is systematic.

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## 1. Introduction and preliminaries

In this paper I present a uniform account of two phenomena that have been usually treated as independent so far: Appropriation of slurs and Variability of thick terms. It is not surprising that Variability and Appropriation were treated as unrelated phenomena, given the fact that the investigation on slurs and thick terms has been mostly conducted in two different – even though related – fields: philosophy of language and linguistics for slurs and ethics and metaethics for thick terms.

Slurs are usually defined as derogatory terms targeting individuals and groups on the basis of their belonging to a certain category. Targets can be identified by properties such as nationality (e.g. ‘wop’ for Italian people, ‘kraut’ or ‘boche’ for German people), sexual orientation (e.g. ‘fag’ or ‘faggot’ for homosexual men, ‘dyke’ for homosexual women), religion (e.g. ‘kike’ for Jewish people), ethnicity (‘nigger’ for black people, ‘chink’ for Asian people), etc. Thick terms, on the other hand, are defined in metaethics as terms that are at once descriptive and evaluative, and they are usually introduced by means of examples. Prototypical instances are terms like ‘lewd’, ‘lascivious’, ‘brutal’, ‘chaste’, ‘generous’, ‘courageous’, ‘cruel’, ‘blasphemous’, ‘selfish’, etc. Many authors (Eklund, 2011, 2013; Harcourt and Thomas, 2013; Kyle, 2013; Väyrynen, 2009, 2013) distinguish between objectionable and non-objectionable thick terms: The former convey an evaluation that speakers are *not* willing to accept as appropriate or warranted; the latter “embody values that ought to be rejected” (Kyle, 2013: 13). Note that this feature – being objectionable or not – is not lexically encoded and it is completely

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independent from the evaluation being positive or negative. For example, a speaker may well share and endorse the negative evaluation conveyed by 'brutal', but reject the one conveyed by 'lewd' and, on the other hand, share the positive evaluation conveyed by 'generous', but reject the one conveyed by 'chaste'.

Several approaches have been developed to account for the main features of slurs and thick terms respectively: according to some theories, the evaluative content of these expressions is part of their truth-conditional meaning, according to others it is the result of pragmatic mechanisms only.<sup>1</sup> I will not present or discuss such alternative approaches in this paper, as the point I want to make is largely independent from any specific analysis of slurs and thick terms. Instead, I will focus on Appropriation, a particular use of slurs (Section 2.1) and compare it to Variability, a particular feature of thick terms (Section 2.2). In Section 3, I propose a uniform account of Appropriation and Variability, relying on the notion of "echoic use" of language, introduced by Relevance Theory (Sperber and Wilson, 1986; Carston, 1996, 2002; Wilson, 2006a, 2006b, 2007; Wilson and Sperber, 2012) and employed by Bianchi (2014) to analyze the appropriated uses of slurs. I will argue that such an echoic approach does not only explain the appropriation of slurs, as Bianchi claims, but it also accounts for the variability of thick terms. Moreover, I employ another related relevance-theoretic notion, the one of attributive uses of language (a type of uses of language of which echoic uses are a subset), to shed light on the crucial distinction between the two often conflated phenomena of 'suspension' and 'reversal' of the evaluative content of slurs and thick terms (Section 3.2). I argue that the theoretically interesting distinction is not between Appropriation and Variability, rather between 'suspension' and 'reversal' of the evaluative content of slurs and thick terms. In Section 3.3, I discuss the theoretical outcomes of my proposal for the theory of thick terms: if variability cases are in fact derivative or parasitic uses of language, they do not count anymore as a counterexample to the claim that thick terms convey or express<sup>2</sup> evaluation in a systematic way. This can be taken to support the claim that slurs and thick terms are similar phenomena. Finally, I conclude by suggesting that the relevance-theoretic notions of "attributive" and "echoic" uses of language seem to be related to similar notions such as "perspectival shift" (Harris and Potts, 2009a, 2009b; Harris, 2012) and "polyphony" (Ducrot, 1984; Recanati, 2006). What is at stake with Appropriation and Variability is the possibility to attribute a certain content to someone else, while possibly expressing one's attitude toward it. This is interesting not only with respect to slurs and thick terms (or evaluatives), it is a very general feature of human language that goes beyond evaluative terms and deserves deeper investigation.

## 2. The impermanence of evaluation

In this section, I present the phenomena of Appropriation and Variability, cases where slurs and thick terms typically conveying a certain evaluation fail to carry it or carry a reversed one.

### 2.1. Appropriation of slurs

With 'Appropriation' we refer to those cases where the members of a group can use among themselves the slur targeting their own group, in such a way that the slur is not offensive nor derogatory anymore in those contexts; on the contrary, appropriated slurs are used to express solidarity and underline intimacy.<sup>3</sup> In such contexts, slurring does not constitute an act of breaking the rules concerning what can and cannot be said; it resembles, *mutatis mutandis*, the kind of sarcasm or mock impoliteness that is typically associated to intimacy (Leech, 1983; Culpeper, 1996, 2016). In light of the

<sup>1</sup> For an analysis of the derogatory content of slurs in terms of truth-conditions, see: Hom (2008, 2010, 2012) and Hom and May (2013, 2014, forthcoming); in terms of conventional implicatures, see: Potts (2005, 2007, 2012), McCreedy (2010), Gutzmann (2011), Whiting (2013), Vallée (2014); in terms of presuppositions, see: Lasersohn (2007), Sauerland (2007), Schlenker (2007), Cepollaro (2015, 2017), Cepollaro and Stojanovic (2016); in terms of rules of use, see Predelli (2013), Gutzmann (2015); in terms of other components of semantics that cannot be identified with standard notions of implicatures, presuppositions etc., see: Camp (2013), Jeshion (2013a,b); in terms of speech acts, see: Langton (2012), Tenchini and Frigerio (2016); in terms of purely pragmatic inferences, see Blakemore (2015), Bolinger (2015), Nunberg (forthcoming). For a deflationary approach, according to which the derogatory power of slurs does not depend on their meaning, see: Anderson and Lepore (2013a, 2013b).

For a survey on the literature on thick terms, see Väyrynen (2013); the loci classici are Williams (1985), Blackburn (1992), Gibbard (1992); more recent approaches in Eklund (2011), Kirchin (2017), Kyle (2013), Väyrynen (2013).

<sup>2</sup> In what follows, I will use 'carry', 'communicate', 'convey' and 'express' interchangeably. In this paper I will stay neutral with respect to *how* slurs and thick terms and the associated derogatory content are related.

<sup>3</sup> Note that in the literature about slurs, some authors (see *i.a.* Hom and May, 2013; Camp, 2013) distinguish between the notions of 'derogation' and 'offense'. Derogation amounts to the ascription of negative evaluative properties to the subject (being bad, being despicable, etc.). Offense has to do with the psychological reaction of addressees and bystanders. To see how the two notions differ, take the case of a person who is offended (psychological reaction) not by the ascription of negative properties, but by the ascription of positive or non-evaluative properties. Under certain circumstances, someone could be offended when called 'clever' (typically positive) or 'bilingual' (typically neutral). This does not make 'clever' or 'bilingual' derogatory, but just offensive for that specific subject in that specific context.

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