

Slurs and appropriation: An echoic account

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Abstract

Slurs are derogatory terms targeting individuals and groups of individuals on the basis of race, nationality, religion, gender or sexual orientation. The aim of my paper is to propose an account of appropriated uses of slurs – i.e. uses by targeted groups of their own slurs for non-derogatory purposes, as in the appropriation of ‘nigger’ by the African-American community, or the appropriation of ‘queer’ by the homosexual community. In my proposal appropriated uses are conceived as *echoic*, in Relevance Theory terms: in-groups echo derogatory uses in ways and contexts that make manifest the dissociation from the offensive contents. I will show that the echoic strategy has interesting advantages over alternative theories, and especially over Anderson and Lepore’s deflationary strategy.

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1. Introduction

Some linguistic expressions possess a strong emotional load, sometimes with an extremely negative value, to the point that they become, in Jennifer Hornsby’s words, ‘absolutely useless’ (Hornsby, 2001: 130). Slurs, in particular, have recently become an object of study for linguists, philosophers of language and legal scholars,¹ also as a part of what Jacob Mey calls ‘emancipatory’ or ‘anticipatory’ pragmatics.² Slurs are derogatory terms – such as ‘nigger’ and ‘faggot’ – targeting individuals and groups of individuals on the basis of race, nationality, religion, gender or sexual orientation. According to most scholars, slurs generally have a neutral counterpart, i.e. a non-derogatory correlate:³ ‘Boche’ and ‘German’, ‘nigger’ and ‘African-American’ or ‘black’, ‘faggot’ and ‘homosexual’.⁴

Treatments of slurs are classified in many ways. In this paper I will classify treatments in three types: *semantic*, *pragmatic* (borrowing Hom’s labels) and *deflationary*.⁵ According to the semantic perspective, the derogatory content of a slur is part of its literal meaning, while according to the pragmatic perspective, the derogatory content of a slur is merely conveyed in context and is part of how the slur is used. I contrast both perspectives to Anderson and Lepore’s deflationary

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¹ The *locus classicus* is the analysis of ‘Boche’ in Dummett (1973): 454; see also Kaplan (1999), Hornsby (2001), Hom (2008), Potts (2008), Richard (2008), Williamson (2009), Predelli (2010), Croom (2011, 2013), Anderson and Lepore (2013a).

² Mey (1985, 1994, 2001, 2012).

³ In what follows I will accept this claim without discussion.

⁴ Actually, the neutral counterpart of ‘faggot’ is ‘male homosexual’; I will use ‘homosexual’ for short.

⁵ The labels *semantic* and *pragmatic* (Hom, 2008: 416) are controversial: see *infra*, footnote 7. I won’t offer specific arguments in favor of this classification, for nothing particularly relevant for my thesis impinges on that.

proposal, according to which slurs are prohibited words not in virtue of any content they express or communicate, but rather because of relevant edicts surrounding their prohibition.⁶

In this paper I won't argue in favor of any particular perspective: my aim is to propose an account of *appropriated* or *reclaimed uses* of slurs. Appropriated uses are uses by targeted groups of their own slurs for non-derogatory purposes, in order to demarcate the group, and show a sense of intimacy and solidarity – as in the appropriation of 'nigger' by the African-American community, or the appropriation of 'gay' and 'queer' by the homosexual community. In my proposal, appropriated uses are conceived as *echoic uses*, in Relevance Theory terms: in-groups echo derogatory uses in ways and contexts that make manifest the dissociation from the offensive contents. My echoic account suggests a solution compatible with the semantic and the pragmatic perspectives, that is with strategies of treatment of slurs *in terms of content* (expressed or conveyed). In so doing I will reply to one of the main objections of Anderson and Lepore against content based accounts, without postulating a change of meaning in appropriated uses. According to Anderson and Lepore, both semantic and pragmatic accounts are bound to claim that the offensive potential of a slur affects its content (expressed or *conventionally* conveyed) in *any* context. The derogation being part of the content (narrow or wide) in both accounts, they must explain by virtue of what reasons not every occurrence of a slur is offensive, as happens in appropriated uses. The objection, if well founded, would represent a knock-down argument for any content based view: if slurs express or convey any conventional linguistic properties responsible for their derogatory potential, there would be no way to explain non offensive uses.

I will show that the echoic account has interesting advantages over alternative accounts, and especially over the deflationary strategy: my proposal will account for the fact that

- I. appropriated uses are generally open only to in-groups;
- II. in-groups may use slurs against their own group;
- III. appropriated uses can be extended also to out-groups – but only to selected speakers in highly regulated situations.

2. Strategies of treatment of slurs

As I have said, there are several alternative taxonomies of treatments of slurs. For the purposes of this paper, I will classify treatments in three types: semantic, pragmatic and deflationary.

- (a) From a semantic perspective the derogatory content of a slur is part of its literal meaning; therefore it is expressed in every context of utterance. In a simplified version, the meaning of 'faggot' may be expressed as 'homosexual and despicable because of it' (Hom, 2008: 416).

According to the semantic perspective, the sentence

- (1) Tom is a faggot

(having as a neutral counterpart

- (2) Tom is a homosexual)

says something we may paraphrase with

- (3) Tom is a homosexual and despicable because of it.

- (b) According to the pragmatic perspective, the derogatory content of a slur is merely conveyed in context.⁷ The most interesting proposals are those made in terms of tone, presuppositions and conventional implicatures. According to the strategy in terms of Fregean tone, 'faggot' and 'homosexual' are synonymous, and differ only in coloring or connotation. According to the strategy in terms of presuppositions, the offensive content of (1) isn't expressed or said but merely presupposed. According to the strategy in terms of conventional implicatures, finally, the offensive content

⁶ Anderson and Lepore (2013b: 350) label their view *Prohibitionism*.

⁷ I adopt here Hom's label 'pragmatic' to indicate the strategies claiming that the derogatory content of slurs "is fundamentally part of how they are used, and results from features of the individual contexts surrounding their utterance" (Hom, 2008: 416). More particularly, I dub 'pragmatic' the strategies in terms of conventional implicatures and presuppositions, although their (semantic or pragmatic) status is far from settled. Notice that both Chris Potts and Elisabeth Camp characterize their views as semantic (Potts, 2007, 2008; Camp, 2013). Nothing relevant to my proposal has a bearing on the particular semantics/pragmatics distinction adopted.

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