



THE SOCIAL LIFE OF SLURS

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It's not immediately clear how the term "slur" should be considered; on the one hand, philosophers of language and linguists treat it as it referred to a natural category, just like "proper name" or "factive verb"; on the other hand, the focus on slurs as a class of terms is quite recent, to the extent that many languages have no term to name the class and adopt the English term instead (in Italian¹. and French, for example, scholars talk about "slurs").

Just like any other complete account of slurs, the present theory answers the following questions: what do these terms do? How do they do it? How does the first follow from the second? The main claim of this talk is that, unlike what most scholars hold, slurs are just plain non-loaded terms: they don't mix a descriptive neutral content together with an expressive one (like thick terms are taken to do). The difference between a slur and its neutral counterpart – take for example "boche" and "German" – is a matter of metadata or social underpinnings, rather than conveyed content (truth-conditional or presuppositional or conventionally implicated): in particular, "boche" is the term chosen to refer to German people among Germanophobes as an alternative to the standard "German". When speakers use a slur, they exploit the Gricean Maxim of Manner or the Levinsonian M-Principle:

When S has said "p" containing marked expression M, and there is an unmarked alternate expression U with the same denotation D which the speaker might have employed in the same sentence-frame instead, then where U would have I-implicated the stereotypical or more specific subset d of D, the marked expression M will implicate the complement of the denotation d, namely d' of D (Levinson, 1987).

The exploitation of the M-Principle gives raise to ventriloquistic implicatures, that are characterized as follows: (i) usually non-cancellable; (ii) generally speaker-oriented; (iii) must be alternatives to contextual default.

¹See for example what happens in Bianchi (2013).

To use a slur is to assert one's affiliation with a group that has a disparaging attitude towards the slur's referent: the source of the pejorativeness of slurs is the attitude associated to the group who owns them. Scholars who investigated slurs usually focused on their abusive use and political effects; but we shouldn't neglect that slurs' primary role is to strengthen a sense of group identity. The mechanism thanks to which slurs convey a derogatory content is entirely pragmatic and has nothing to do with the meaning of the term itself. Nevertheless, speakers share this intuition about slurs as conveying their derogatory content in a conventional manner. The present account can assess the issue as follows: a certain group of speakers adopts a term because they think it answers to certain communicative purposes of theirs and this coordination gives rise to a convention; but it is a meta-data convention, it doesn't concern neither the truth-conditional meaning nor the conventionally implicated nor the presuppositional one. The standard view on slurs is that "nigger" is conventionally used among English-speakers to refer to blacks when one wants to convey a contemptuous attitude towards them; the present proposal, on the contrary, holds that "nigger" is the conventional descriptive way for blacks among the participants in a English-speaking discourse where blacks are viewed as with contempt.

From this perspective, slurs don't constitute a natural class: on the contrary, they are very similar to other terms, such as derogatives based on political orientation ("commie","facho"), social status ("pleb", "plutocrat"), religion ("papist", "clamhead"), derogative proper names (LaLa Land, Barack Hussein Obama), approbatives ("public servant", "free enterprise"), etc. The set of all these terms can be called "Prejudicals".

In addition to explaining the characterizing features usually associated to slurs, the account in terms of metadata knowledge also explains some unexplored features, such as the variation in tone and strength among the different slurs for the same target group and the role of slurs in shaping the social identity of their users (not just the effects they produce on their victims), all with no need of additional linguistic mechanisms.

References

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