

On the non-specificity of slurs¹

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Abstract A quite neglected question pertaining to the classification of the different theories on slurs concerns their extendibility to other pejoratives and expressives in general. In this paper, we show that the linguistic behaviour of pejoratives is similar to that of slurs. Therefore, a theory on slurs that is also extendible to other pejoratives and expressives is, other things being equal, preferable to a theory that is not applicable to other classes beyond slurs. Slurs seem to differ from other pejoratives as the latter seem to target single persons and not a class of persons. This implies that the derogatory component of slurs does not seem to project outside negative, conditional, modal and interrogative contexts. Nevertheless, we demonstrate that this difference is deceptive due to some specific features of the other pejoratives, such as targeting negative characteristics or having a fuzzy extension.

Keywords: Slurs, Pejoratives, Expressives, Emotional language, Theoretical scalability

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0. Introduction

Much has been written on slurs and the literature on this subject has grown impressively over the years. Over a decade since the publication of Hom (2008), slurs have become one of the most discussed topics in the analytic philosophy of language and linguistics. The debate is lively, and several theories have been advanced. These theories try to account for the semantics, pragmatics and psycho-social dimensions of slurs and can be classified in various ways².

¹ Although this paper results from the collective work of the authors, Maria Paola Tenchini has written the first four sections and Aldo Frigerio has written the last three sections.

² One of the most common classifications distinguishes silentist (cf. Anderson and Lepore 2013a, 2013b; Nunberg 2018), truth conditional (cf. Hom 2008, 2012; Hom and May 2013, 2018) and pragmatic theories. Pragmatic theories, in turn, are divided into those that identify the offensive content with a presupposition (cf. Macià 2002; Schlenker 2007; Cepollaro 2015; Garcia-Carpintero 2017) and those that identify it with a conventional implicature (cf. Potts 2005, 2007; McCready 2010; Whiting 2013; Gutzmann 2015).

However, there remains a question that is often neglected by these classifications: whether a theory can be extended to all expressives or it is specific of slurs. The theories of the first kind tend to consider slurs as a particular case of a more general class of expressions, which contains the rest of pejoratives, amelioratives (e.g. honorifics) and expressives in general. In comparison, the theories of the second kind tend to consider slurs as a specific class of expressions, which is separated by the larger class of expressives.

To illustrate this difference, let us consider two extreme cases: on the one side, a theory that aims to give an account of a large class of expressions and, on the other side, a theory that is specific for slurs and acknowledges their peculiarity. Potts (2005, 2007) claims that slurs have two meaning dimensions, a descriptive and an expressive one; the latter is a dimension shared by pejoratives in general (slurs, bad words, curses, swearing, vulgar terms) and honorifics (e.g. courtesy pronouns). Moreover, Potts believes that the expressive part of the meaning of these terms should be interpreted as a conventional implicature. Conventional implicatures also include other phenomena, such as appositives. On the contrary, Nunberg (2018), for instance, claims that slurs are expressions that must be treated differently from other pejoratives. He supports a silentist theory, which argues that slurs are taboo words that only bigots use. Furthermore, Nunberg explicitly claims that such a theory cannot be applied to other pejoratives (cf. 2018: 244).

Not every theory about slurs clearly belongs to one of the two aforementioned categories. For instance, the authors who support a presuppositional account of slurs (Macià 2002, Garcia-Carpintero 2017, Schlencker 2007, Cepollaro 2015) do not fully clarify whether they consider their theories to be extendible to other pejoratives and expressives or, if they do, how their theories should be extended to cover them. Likewise, it is not clear whether the advocates of the truth conditional theory of slurs (Hom and May 2013) think that their theory can be extended (if possible) and how this can be achieved.

In this essay, we will investigate the reasons why slurs should be treated differently from other pejoratives, such as ‘bastard’ and ‘asshole’. In fact, we will see that these pejoratives have, at least at first sight, some features that distinguish them from slurs, which might provide support to the thesis that slurs are specific expressions. However, we will also show that these differences are illusory and that there is no linguistic reason to treat slurs differently. Hence, this essay intends to bolster the case of the non-specificity of slurs with respect to other expressives. This should count against the theories that treat slurs differently from the other expressives.

The rest of this paper is divided as follows. In Section 1, some alleged differences between slurs and other pejoratives are examined. These differences might lead to believe that slurs are peculiar expressions. Section 2 shows that a slur, such as ‘faggot’, has the same semantic structure of a pejorative, such as ‘crook’. In fact, there are some differences between these two terms, but they have extra-semantic nature. Section 3 demonstrates that pejoratives, such as ‘bastard’ and ‘asshole’, also have the same semantic structure, even though this is obscured by the fuzziness of the extension of these terms. In Section 4, the differences between slurs and the other pejoratives presented in Section 1 are explained away on the basis of the fuzziness of the extensions of ‘bastard’ and ‘asshole’ and of other extra-semantic factors. Section 5 analyses the impact of the findings of the previous sections on the theories of slurs. Section 6 concludes the paper.

1. Linguistic differences

Slurs have an important property: when they are used, they do not only derogate the person of which they are predicated but also an entire class. Consider the following sentence:

(1) Paul is a faggot

(1) derogates not only Paul but the whole class of homosexuals. Such expressions as ‘bastard’ and ‘asshole’ seem to behave differently. They seem to have a specific target:

(2) Paul is a bastard

(3) Paul is an asshole

These two sentences seem to denigrate anyone else but Paul. On the contrary, (1) seems to denigrate Paul indirectly: this is because it expresses contempt toward the class of homosexuals that Paul, being a member of this class, can feel to be denigrated. If Paul is not homosexual, (1) still denigrates homosexuals. Instead, (2) and (3) seem to be directed to a specific individual.

This difference between slurs and other pejoratives has important consequences when these expressions are embedded into particular contexts. Slurs are non-displaceable³: as embedded as they may be, slurs project their derogatory component, as shown below:

(4) Paul is not a faggot

(5) If there are faggots, I will not come

(6) There might be faggots

(7) Is Paul a faggot?

In (4)–(7), the slur is embedded in negative, conditional, modal and interrogative contexts, respectively. Nonetheless, these sentences still derogate homosexuals. The sole contexts in which a slur may lose its derogatory charge is the reporting one:

(8) Ann says that Paul is a faggot

It is debatable whether (8) denigrates homosexuals or it simply attributes the derogatory content to Ann⁴. Yet, with the possible exception of (8), the derogatory content of slurs has a strong tendency to outscope every operator.

Other pejoratives are different. Consider the following sentences that are parallel to (4)–(7):

(9) Paul is not a bastard

(10) If there are bastards, I will not come

(11) There could be bastards here

(12) Is Paul a bastard?

Contrary to (4)–(7), (9)–(12) seem to denigrate nobody in particular. For instance, (9) does not denigrate Paul because it denies that Paul is a bastard. However, as ‘bastard’ is directed toward specific individuals, if Paul is not the target, no one else seems to be.

³ Hom (2010), Potts (2007) and Schlencker (2007) use this term, whereas Croom (2011) labels this phenomenon “scopelessness”.

⁴ About this, cf. Tenchini and Frigerio (2020).

Analogously, (10) seems to target nobody in particular: it is even compatible with the possibility that there are no bastards. These features of such pejoratives as ‘bastard’ and ‘asshole’ might lead to think they are displaceable. These linguistic differences seem to suggest that slurs are expressions with a specific semantics, which deserves to be treated separately.

However, something is not coherent with this idea. Although (9)–(12) seem to derogate nobody, they contain a pejorative that keeps its expressivity, even if it is not clear to whom it is directed. If ‘asshole’ were substituted to ‘bastard’ in (9)–(12), such sentences would be classified as vulgar. This means that the vulgarity of the term (and with it, its expressivity) is projected outside the context in which the pejorative is embedded. The question is: which is the target of the expressivity of pejoratives such those contained in (9)–(12)? If there is no specific target, who is the speaker’s negative attitude directed to?

2. The semantic structure of slurs and other pejoratives

To ascertain whether the difference between slurs and other pejoratives is real, we need to say something about the semantics of slurs. All scholars agree on the fact that some similarities exist between a slur and the corresponding neutral term, for instance between ‘faggot’ and ‘homosexual’. In agreement with the majority of scholars⁵, we believe that ‘faggot’ and ‘homosexual’ have the same extension, that is, they refer to the same class of individuals. Of course, there must also be some differences between ‘faggot’ and ‘homosexual’ as the former derogates homosexuals and the latter does not. However, a disagreement exists regarding the derogatory component of slurs, and this has been variously interpreted as presupposition, conventional implicature, Fregean tone, register, etc. Silentists such as Anderson and Lepore even deny that this component exists, claiming that the difference simply amounts to the fact that slurs are taboo terms whereas neutral terms are not. However, also in this case, we will follow the advice of the majority of scholars: we will presuppose that the derogatory component of slurs exists but, to keep our argument as general as possible, we will not take a stance on its nature.

To determine whether such words as ‘bastard’ and ‘asshole’ have the same semantics of slurs, we need to understand whether they have both these components: the referential and the derogative one. Do ‘bastard’ and ‘asshole’ have an extension? If so, which one? Do they have a derogatory component that denigrates the members of this extension? One might guess that these questions deserve a negative answer. These pejoratives do not seem to derogate a group of individuals but have a specific target, which varies from one context to another. We aim to show that this hypothesis is wrong and that the similarities between ‘faggot’ and ‘bastard’ are more remarkable than they may appear at first sight.

To demonstrate this, we start by using an easy example: ‘crook’. We then extend our analysis to ‘bastard’ and ‘asshole’. ‘Crook’ clearly has an extension, which is the same of ‘criminal’: both terms refer to persons who do something illegal, thus breaking the law. However, there is a difference between ‘crook’ and ‘criminal’: the former is an expressive term that derogates criminals, whilst the latter is neutral. This statement requires some clarifications because it can easily be misunderstood. When we say that ‘criminal’ is a neutral term, we do not mean that it does not denote morally reprehensive persons. Certainly, it does. However, we believe that it is not an expressive term, as

⁵ Not everybody agrees on this point; for instance, the advocates of the truth-conditional theory believe that the extension of ‘faggot’ is empty and, thus, differs from that of ‘homosexual’, cf. Hom and May (2013, 2018).

‘crook’ is. ‘Criminal’ denotes the class of persons who have some properties, that is doing something illegal, thereby breaking the law. These properties are usually considered negative from the moral point of view; therefore, the term ‘criminal’ denotes reprehensive persons. However, this is a *consequence*, not something intrinsic to the semantics of the term. We do not mean that predicating ‘criminal’ of somebody does not attribute negative properties to the subject, but we believe that this is something that follows from the fact that ‘criminal’ attributes some properties and from the fact that these properties are negatively considered in our society.

‘Crook’ differs from ‘criminal’ because the former does not only attribute properties usually considered negatively but also expresses a negative attitude of the speaker toward criminals. Whereas the negativity of ‘criminal’ derives from the attribution of certain properties, ‘crook’ also expresses a pejorative content toward those properties. This derogatory content outscopes all operators, as in the case of slurs:

- (13) Paul is not a crook
- (14) If there are crooks, I will not come
- (15) There might be crooks
- (16) Is Paul a crook?

(13)–(16) express a derogatory attitude toward criminals, as the statement ‘Paul is a crook’ does. As a consequence, ‘faggot’ and ‘crook’ do not differ as far as their semantic structure is concerned: both terms have an extension (in the first case the class of homosexuals, in the second the class of criminals), and both express a derogatory content toward the members of such class, which projects in almost every context (maybe with the exception of the reporting contexts).

A couple of things might obscure this identity of semantic structure. These factors, however, have an extra-semantic but not a semantic nature. Both the extensions of ‘faggot’ and of ‘crook’ are defined by a set of properties (usually called *intension*). For the sake of brevity, we take both extensions as being identified by the properties of being a homosexual and a criminal, respectively. However, the property of being a homosexual is morally neutral, at least in the eyes of non-bigots, whilst the property of being a criminal is morally negative. This can be extended to every slur: the properties that identify the extension of these terms (race, gender, sexual preferences, etc.) are not morally evaluable. Instead, being a criminal is morally negative. The second difference is a consequence of the first one: we judge wrong, bigot and offensive to express negative attitudes toward homosexuals, Afro-Americans, or women in general because they have these properties. As these features cannot be morally evaluated, the persons who express a negative attitude toward them are subject to social (if not juridical) sanction. By contrast, expressing a negative attitude toward a property that is usually considered negative is much less sanctioned. Nevertheless, it *may* be sanctioned in certain contexts. For instance, we do not expect to find the term ‘crook’ in a police report or in a court judgement. Police officers and judges, given their institutional roles, should maintain a detached and impartial attitude toward criminals. The use of this term could imply an emotive attitude by an institutional figure, which may be judged negatively. However, a negative attitude toward a negative feature is generally judged to be slightly sanctionable; in fact, it is sometimes well-accepted.

These important differences account for our reactions to the use of certain terms. However, strictly speaking, they have nothing to do with the semantics of the words. The terms ‘faggot’ and ‘crook’ both have an extension and express a derogatory content toward the members of this extension. Due to this semantic structure, they can be classified into the same semantic category and treated in the same way. There are

important differences from the moral point of view regarding the properties shared by the members of the extension and the negative attitude toward these properties. However, this has to do with ethics and not with semantics, which is morally innocent in itself.

In the next section, we will see whether this semantic structure also characterises such terms as ‘bastard’ and ‘asshole’. The answer to this question is positive, although it is obscured by further complications that are specific of these terms.

3. Fuzzy extensions

Wondering whether ‘bastard’ and ‘asshole’ have an intension and an extension means wondering whether all bastards and all assholes have something in common that would allow us to characterise them in this way. If we deny that such terms have an extension and an intension, then their uses can be united only for the fact that a certain person is targeted by using such terms. In other words, all bastards would be united exclusively for having been targeted through the use of this term in different occasions. They would have no *intrinsic* feature in common that would allow their inclusion into the same class. They would differ from ‘faggot’ and ‘crook’. Whereas faggots are united by the property of being homosexual and crook by the property of being criminal, there would exist no property of this kind for bastards and assholes. On the contrary, if ‘bastard’ and ‘asshole’ both have an extension and an intension, then some kind of property is shared by the members of the extension, and such a property is independent of the fact that a speaker has insulted these persons using these terms.

We will defend the thesis that ‘bastard’ and ‘asshole’ actually have an extension, although a fuzzy one, because the properties that constitute their intension are very vague. ‘Bastard’ is associated with such properties as being an unpleasant and self-centred person, whilst ‘asshole’ is associated with such properties as being stupid and foolish or behaving in a stupid way. Our thesis requires some clarifications because, also in this case, it can be easily misunderstood. One might object that being a criminal or being a homosexual are vague properties and that, for this reason, the extension of these terms is a fuzzy set. In fact, this is the case. Sometimes, it is not clear whether a certain action is a crime, for instance when someone seizes something whose owner is very difficult or even impossible to identify. Analogously, sometimes, the sexual orientation of a person is not well defined, which makes it difficult to ascribe him to the class of homosexuals or to that of heterosexuals. Being a criminal or a homosexual are graded properties. However, even though this is true, in most cases we have no doubt in assigning somebody to the extension or the anti-extension of these classes. The vagueness of these terms is characteristic of many words of our language. Perhaps only geometrical and mathematical terms are not so vague. By contrast, we believe that ‘bastard’ and ‘asshole’ are much vaguer. Firstly, specifying the properties that constitute the intension of these words is difficult. We have made an attempt above, but one may question whether our definitions are correct and maintain that other properties are more adequate. Secondly, even though defining bastards as unpleasant and self-centred persons is correct, it is difficult to establish whether a person has these properties, to what degree he has them and whether he has them in a stable manner. Behaving in an unpleasant way in some circumstances presumably does not suffice to define a person as unpleasant and having a certain tendency to be self-centred is not tantamount to actually being self-centred. The fuzziness and vagueness that are proper of these terms are much more marked than the normal vagueness that is typical of most words of our language. Therefore, we can say that terms, such as ‘bastard’ and ‘asshole’, have an indefinite extension *in comparison to* terms, such as ‘faggot’ and ‘crook’.

We believe that a greater vagueness is the main semantic difference between ‘bastard’ and ‘asshole’ on the one hand and ‘faggot’ and ‘crook’ on the other hand. All these terms are similar in other aspects: all of them have both a (more or less vague) referential component and a derogatory component. ‘Bastard’ and ‘asshole’ have a vague extension, but as ‘faggot’ and ‘crook’, they express a negative attitude toward the members of this extension, whatever it may be. ‘Bastard’ and ‘asshole’ share with ‘crook’ but not with ‘faggot’ the fact that the properties constituting their intension are morally reprehensible. Generally, we predict a greater tolerance and fewer social sanctions toward the use of these terms when attributed to persons who actually have these properties. Indeed, a negative attitude toward an unpleasant and self-centred person can, at least in some context, be accepted.

In the next section, we will analyse the consequence of the semantic differences of ‘asshole’ and ‘bastard’ vs. ‘crook’ and ‘faggot’ and we will show how they yield the alleged scope differences amongst these terms as discussed in Section 1.

4. Narrow-scope appearance

Let us analyse (17) along the semantics proposed in the previous section:

(17) Paul is a bastard

In uttering (17), the speaker states that Paul is one of the members of the extension of ‘bastard’. Thus, he has the proprieties that are shared by the members of the extension, for example, being a self-centred and unpleasant person. Moreover, the speaker expresses the derogatory component of the pejorative, that is a negative attitude toward these properties. As a consequence, s/he also expresses a negative attitude toward Paul who has these properties. Notice that this semantic machinery is the same of slurs: also in that case, an individual is stated to be member of the extension of the term and, since the slur expresses a negative attitude toward the members of the extension, it also expresses a negative attitude toward the subject to whom the slur is attributed. As stated above, there are two differences between (1) and (17). Firstly, the properties that constitute the intension of the slur are morally neutral, whilst those that constitute the intension of ‘bastard’ are negative. Secondly, these properties are much vaguer in the case of ‘bastard’ than in the case of ‘faggot’, that is, establishing whether someone is a self-centred and unpleasant person is more difficult rather than determining whether he is homosexual.

Let us consider now the negation of (17), that is (9), which we repeat here:

(9) Paul is not a bastard

(9) denies that Paul is part of the extension of ‘bastard’ and, thus, that he has the properties that constitute the intension of the term. Since (9) expresses the speaker’s derogatory attitude toward these properties, Paul is not amongst the targets of this derogatory attitude. Our main point is that the derogatory component of ‘bastard’ does outscope the negation, as in the cases of slurs (cf. (4)) and of other pejoratives such as ‘crook’ (cf. (13)). As we have seen, however, some differences may make it *appear* that the case of (9) is different from that of (4). Firstly, in (9) the speaker expresses a negative attitude toward properties that are usually considered negative. Generally, this gives rise to a less strong reaction than in the case in which the speaker expresses a negative attitude toward a neutral property. Obviously, at least in certain contexts, the use of ‘bastard’ is improper given its expressivity and aggressivity. Especially in formal

contexts, the expression of too strong emotions is considered impolite because these contexts require a calm and detached attitude (cf. Brown & Levinson 19987). However, clearly, the expression of a derogatory content toward a negative property is usually judged less severely than the use of a slur. Secondly, these properties are vague. For example, besides Paul, the listeners of (9) might believe that they do not possess these properties. Usually, we tend to be indulgent toward ourselves and believe that we do not possess a negative property. Anyway, even though somebody believes that s/he has the negative properties expressed by the pejorative, s/he may prefer not to react to its use because a negative attitude toward a negative property is at least partly justified.

These features might lead to the assumption that the speaker targets nobody in uttering (9) and that the derogatory component is not projected. However, if the semantics we have proposed here is on the right track, the opposite is true: this component is projected even though it regards a negative property that everybody might believe not to possess. Therefore, everybody might believe that s/he is excluded by the targets of the speaker. There is no difference in the semantic *structure* of ‘faggot’ and ‘bastard’: both terms have a referential component and a derogatory component, which is projected in all contexts, except perhaps reporting contexts. The differences concern extra-semantic factors, such as the moral judgment on certain properties, and semantic factors of a different kind, such as the degree of vagueness of the terms in question.

5. Theoretical consequences

In spite of appearances, slurs and pejoratives (e.g. ‘crook’, ‘bastard’, ‘asshole’, etc.) all have the same semantic structure. Hence, it is possible to propose a general semantic theory that embraces all pejoratives, of which slurs are a subclass. Pejoratives, in turn, are a subclass of expressives, which also include expressions with an opposite meaning, that is, amelioratives. Thus, one may think that providing a general semantic theory that includes all expressives, both pejorative and ameliorative, is possible. In this sense, slurs do not seem to be exceptional terms worthy of a specific treatment⁶.

The reflections presented in the preceding sections strengthen those theories on slurs that are scalable, that is, general enough to be applied to other pejoratives and amelioratives. As stated above, Potts (2005, 2007) tried to provide a theory of this kind in which the derogatory component of pejoratives is considered as a conventional implicature. Such an expressive component characterises all pejoratives, and also amelioratives and honorifics. Conversely, theories such as that of Nunberg (2018), in which slurs are treated as a separate category and thus worthy of a specific semantic treatment, are weakened by the previous arguments.

Regarding other theories on slurs that do not take a position about the scalability of the theory and its extensibility to other pejoratives, we believe that one of the criteria to be used in their evaluation is the possibility of applying these theories to expressives in general. We believe that the smooth scalability of the theory is an advantage for the theory itself. On the contrary, the inability to demonstrate clearly how the theory can be applied to other pejoratives and expressives can be considered a drawback.

Let us consider, for example, Anderson and Lepore’s (2013a-b) silentist theory, which posits that slurs do not have any derogatory content but are simply taboo words that cannot be uttered. It remains debatable whether this theory can be applied to all

⁶ We tried to provide a classification of pejoratives in Frigerio and Tenchini (2019). In this paper, we proposed several dimensions along which pejoratives can be classified. Slurs are no exception and can be classified along the same dimensions.

pejoratives, but in any case, it cannot be applied to amelioratives and, hence, to expressives in general. In our view, this is an argument against such a theory.

6. Conclusion

A quite neglected question pertaining to the classification of the different theories of slurs concerns their extendibility to other pejoratives and expressives in general. In our paper, we have shown that there is no reason to claim that the linguistic behaviour of pejoratives differs from that of slurs. Therefore, a theory on slurs that is extendible also to other pejoratives and expressives in general is, other things being equal, preferable to a theory that is not applicable to other classes beyond slurs.

Slurs seem to differ from other pejoratives as the latter (or at least an important class of the latter) seem to target single persons and not a class of persons. This implies that their derogatory component does not seem to project outside negative, conditional, modal and interrogative contexts. Nevertheless, we have shown that this difference is deceptive, raising from some specific features of the other pejoratives, such as, targeting negative characteristics or having a fuzzy extension. Such features, however, do not erase the fact that slurs and other pejoratives share the same semantic structure. This is an argument in favour of the hypothesis that slurs are not exceptional and that their semantics is close to that of other pejoratives and expressives in general.

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