



Semantic Dimensions of Slurs

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Abstract

I plot accounts of slurs on a [semanticist – non-semanticist] spectrum, and then I give some original arguments in favor of semanticist approaches. Two core, related pro-semanticist considerations which animate this work are: first, that the pejorative dimension of a slur is non-cancellable; and, second, that ignorance of the pejorative dimension should be counted as ignorance of literal, linguistic meaning, as opposed to (say) a mistake about conditions for appropriate usage. I bolster these considerations via cases in which slurs are embedded within complex constructions, in which cases the pejorative dimension of a slur gets ensnared within the compositional semantic machinery.

Keywords Slurs · Semantics · Pragmatics

1 Introduction

This paper is about slurs: terms that categorize a target, via membership within a group of people, in a way which involves a pejorative component. More specifically, its focus is group slurs (i.e., applied by their users more or less indiscriminately across members of a race, sexual orientation, etc.) as opposed to those which are applied to an individual per se (so: ‘nigger’, ‘dyke’, as opposed to ‘jerk’, ‘moron’).¹ Slurs have received a lot of attention in recent philosophy of language, as attempts to

¹ There is a delicate trade-off to be negotiated here. On the one hand, slurs can be repugnant, offensive terms which cause real harm; hence there is plenty of reason to avoid mentioning them, and instead using stand-in labels ‘N’, ‘D’, etc. (Cf. Waldron (2012) on slurs and harm, and cf. Hom (2008), Jeshion (2013) for discussions of the “derogatory autonomy” of a slur – i.e., their power to offend does not depend on malicious intent on the part of individual speakers, and so can be not at all mollified by scholarly appeals to use/mention distinctions.) On the other hand, there is a cost to this otherwise well-motivated euphemizing: given that the target data *are* repugnant, offensive and harmful, it is important to keep those factors in plain sight. Along with many colleagues, I tend to negotiate this tradeoff differently in different contexts – say, a large undergraduate class vs. a small audience of experts. However, for the purposes of this paper, which is about the semantic content of utterances involving slurs, I find it indispensable to explicitly mention some repugnant slurs. (Compare the opening sections of Camp (2018), Pullum (2018),

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engage with their precise workings prompt challenges for traditional conceptions of linguistic meaning and the semantics/pragmatics interface.

After laying some groundwork in §2, in §3 I plot accounts of slurs on a [semanticist – non-semanticist] spectrum, and then in §4 I give some original arguments in favor of semanticist approaches. To orient the space of options in a preliminary way: Semanticists hold that slurs instance a distinctive kind of meaning, not merely of usage – i.e., the pejorative dimension of a slur is a constituent element of its literal linguistic meaning. Illustrative examples of different sorts of semanticism include Hom’s (2008) “combinatorial externalism”, Jeshion’s (2013) version of expressivism, Vallee’s (2014) multiple-propositions account, and Bach’s (2018) “loaded descriptivism”. In contrast, non-semanticists hold that the pejorative dimension of a slur should rather be attributed to “some other mechanism that is sufficiently easy for ordinary speakers to confuse with the semantics of the term” (Croom, 2014). Typically, non-semanticists hold that slurs are semantically equivalent to their neutral counterparts; while they certainly do not deny that differences exist between (say) ‘dyke’ and ‘homosexual woman’, they insist that such differences are not located in, or explained via, linguistic meaning. Non-semanticist varieties include Anderson and Lepore’s (2013) ‘prohibitionist’ account, Bolinger’s (2017) ‘impoliteness’ view, and Nunberg’s (2018) treatment of the pejorative content of a slur as a kind of particularized conversational implicature.

Two core, related pro-semanticist considerations which animate this present work are: first, that the pejorative dimension of a slur is non-cancellable; and, second, that ignorance of the pejorative dimension should be counted as ignorance of literal, linguistic meaning, as opposed to a mistake about conditions for appropriate usage. I bolster these considerations via cases in which slurs are embedded within complex constructions, in which cases the pejorative dimension of a slur gets ensnared within the compositional semantic machinery.

A few final framing notes: these arguments are non-demonstrative – situated as they are in the shifting sands around the semantics/pragmatics border. Individuating linguistic meanings is a notoriously complex and contentious affair; there simply is no expert consensus on which one could rely for leverage, when it comes to how matters of literal meaning ought to be divided off from questions about language use. (There is more discussion of this circumstance in §3 below.) So, the aim of what follows is not to try to conclusively prove anything, but rather to identify and articulate some motivations for a certain position on the issue. Further, though: I also want to press the point that some anti-semanticist arguments (at least implicitly) hold slurs to an unreasonably high standard – i.e., if semanticists cannot come up with a comprehensive, defensible account of a slur’s semantic content, then they should give it up. In general, few philosophers would impose such strictures on investigations into

Footnote 1 (continued)

both of whom arrive at the same conclusion.)

For the record, I myself am sympathetic to a variant of Hornsby (2001)/Hom and May (2018) “empty extension” view. (Roughly: slurs inherently include assumptions about the evaluative significance of race, gender, etc. that are not merely repugnant, but simply false – no one is contemptible or inferior in virtue of falling into any such sort of category. Ultimately, this will entail that genuine uses of slurs have null extension.) However, nothing in this paper presupposes this controversial doctrine.

the content of (say) ‘causation’, ‘good’, ‘justice’, ‘knowledge’, ‘norm’, ‘right’. Analogously, not much in the way of specific, substantive conclusions may be reasonably inferred from the premise that we do not (yet) have the final comprehensive account of the semantic content of a slur.

2 Some Groundwork

Even limiting our scope to semantic questions about slurs – as opposed to, say, psychological, moral, and political questions to which they are constitutively linked – the space of possibilities is still very complicated. There are various different questions one might ask about the semantics of slurs, and accordingly different ways to sub-categorize accounts of exactly what they are and how they work. Hence, it will take some groundwork to carve out some relatively precise questions about semantic dimensions of slurs.

Slurs exhibit several features which are not easily amenable to standard semantic explanation. There is something particularly amorphous and shifty about their semantic potential. For one, slurring terms admit of very different sub-types of usage, and so the pejorative impact of a slur may vary enormously according to who says it to whom in which context (cf. Anderson (2018), Diaz-Legaspe (2018)). Relatedly, a slur’s pejorative content is resistant to capture by paraphrase (Diaz-Legaspe et al. (2020) call this property “descriptive ineffability”). It also exhibits non-standard non-displaceable projective behavior (i.e., it does not behave like semantic content normally does, when embedded within conditional clauses, inside the scope of negation, etc. – cf. Potts (2007), Pullum (2018)). Not surprisingly, given all that, there are vexing disagreements over the truth-conditions of statements containing slurs (cf. Bach (2018), Camp (2018)).²

These distinctive, anomalous features of slurs have been taken to motivate anti-semanticism. However, such considerations hardly suffice to refute semanticism. It is not news that some linguistic meanings might be more complex, elusive, and resistant to paraphrase than others.³ That slurs instance a distinct kind of meaning is compatible with those meanings being an unusual specimen of the genre, in various respects. Further, it is arguable that slurs’ unusual projective behavior and truth-conditional complexity are better accounted for on a semanticist view that posits

² For example, there is robust disagreement over this sort of question:

Is it TRUE or FALSE that Obama is not a nigger?

Subsequent to this initial division, there will be further divisions among those who give the same answer to it, when it comes to why they give the answer they do. FALSE could be divided between (at least) racists and those anti-semanticists who hold that slurs are semantically equivalent to their neutral counterparts; TRUE could be divided between (at least) ‘empty extension’ theorists and those who think of slurs as confined to just stereotype-conforming members of the target group. (All of this variance illustrates the multiple semantic dimensions to slurs. More on this below.)

³ Surely, Socrates recognized that – not to mention Moore (1903: Ch.1), Frege (1918: 23–4), Davidson (1967: 315–8), and so on.

complex, unusual meanings than on a view that tries to account for those effects non-semantically.

The point about multiple distinct types of slur-usage, however, definitely poses a challenge for setting up the kinds of questions in which I am interested. It threatens to undermine the very idea of generalizing about the meaning of a slur. Accordingly, I will next work to isolate some reasonably specific questions about the semantics of slurs. We start from straightforward paradigm cases of use (e.g., ‘Rome has four hills’) vs. straightforward paradigm cases of mention (e.g., “‘Rome’ has four letters”). Only a xenophobe would use a slur; non-xenophobic theorists interested in the topic have to do a lot of mentioning of terms which they might otherwise find repugnant.⁴ Of course, from ‘Giorgione’ on down to Predelli (2018), there are shades of grey between these paradigm cases of use vs. mention. Many sub-types of (appropriated) slur-usage alluded to above belong in here, involving degrees of what Wilson and Sperber (2012) call “echoic allusion” (e.g., ‘Queer Studies’, ‘Slut Walk’).

Let us sharpen the focus onto a sub-type of slur-usage, which I will call a ‘genuine use’ of a slur. There are three components to a genuine use of a slur: [1] CATEGORIZATION, [2] DEROGATION, and [3] THE ‘IN VIRTUE OF’ RELATION. To begin, it is left open whether any or all three of these are semantic dimensions, or should rather be theoretically accommodated via some other means.

- [1] Slurs categorize. They have conditions of correct application (which may be vague). To literally call a white person ‘nigger’ would instance (among other problems) a basic linguistic error comparable to calling asparagus ‘broccoli’. That is a mistake about the term’s conventional extension.
- [2] Slurs derogate. There may be difference of opinion as to the specific derogatory content of any particular slur, as to its relative register. Here (arguably, even more so than in general, across the lexicon), there is dialectical variation and change over time.⁵ Still, when a slur is genuinely used, the target is not merely categorized, but rather negatively categorized as (to some degree) contemptible, as (in some respects) inferior.
- [3] Slurs do not just categorize + derogate. They are not simply Boolean conjunctive concepts (e.g., unlike [bachelor = unmarried + man], [nigger ≠ dark-skinned + contemptible]). Rather, to genuinely use the term ‘nigger’ derogates a target as contemptible or inferior in virtue of falling into a certain racial category; to genuinely use the term ‘dyke’ derogates someone as contemptible or inferior in virtue of their falling into a certain sexual orientation category; etc.⁶

⁴ I follow the convention of using ‘xenophobe’ as shorthand for: racist or homophobe or misogynist or etc.

⁵ Cf. Kennedy (2003) for a case study.

⁶ There are some rather bracingly quick anti-semanticist arguments which are taken seriously in solid research on the topic (e.g., Nunberg (2018), Pullum (2018)), but which I take to be countered by recognizing the importance of this ‘in virtue of’ component. For example, *if the content semantically expressed by ‘Obama is not a nigger’ is that Obama is not contemptible in virtue of being black, then where is the offense in that? We should all agree with it, and feel good about doing so. But, of course, we aren’t. Ergo, semanticist accounts of the pejorative content of a slur are mistaken.*

To the contrary, the ‘in virtue of’ component shows why there does not lurk an insurmountable problem

So: a genuine use of a slur derogates in virtue of categorization. Again, there are plenty of kinds of slur-usage which are not genuine uses, in this sense; and it is no part of the present project to establish that this ‘genuine use’ is the typical or fundamental or most significant use. Rather, I presume that there exist some genuine uses of slurs, and what follows is, first and foremost, expressly addressed to them. For now, it is left open whether the arguments could support further, more far-reaching conclusions about other varieties of slur-usage.

3 The Semantics/Pragmatics Interface

Given the aforementioned distinctive, complex features of slurs, it should come as no surprise that the [semanticist – non-semanticist] spectrum is not a simple binary opposition. Plenty of options have been carved out between the extreme semanticist / non-semanticist poles (i.e., respectively: the pejorative dimension of a slur is a core part of its literal linguistic meaning / whatever differences exist between slurs and their neutral counterparts are absolutely and unequivocally not the concern of semantics).

To add some color, here are a few illustrative accounts of slurs whose relation to the S/P interface is less than straightforward. For starters, many hold that Grice’s (1989) notion of a ‘conventional implicature’ provides an illuminating way to think about the pejorative dimension of a slur (e.g., Potts (2005), Williamson (2009), McCready (2010)). However, especially since Grice’s stance on the truth-conditional status of conventional implicatures has not fared well under subsequent scrutiny (cf. Bach (1999)), it is far from clear how ‘conventional implicatures’ should be taken to relate to the S/P distinction.⁷ Similarly for presuppositional accounts of slurs (e.g., Schlenker (2007), Potts (2015)) – while presupposition contrasts with (declarative, at-issue) semantic content, presuppositions are (like conventional implicatures) non-cancellable, and so in that key respect closer kin to semantic content than to pragmatic implicature. (Much more on ‘cancellability’ shortly.) Another sort of approach

Footnote 6 (continued)

for any and all semanticist accounts of slurs here. It entails that it is racist to use the term ‘nigger’; that only a homophobe could possibly use the term ‘dyke’; and so on. These terms rest on repugnant views about the evaluative significance of race or sexual orientation. That suffices to explain their offensiveness, and the point is compatible with a semanticist approach to their derogatory content. (Analogously, purely semantic properties of ‘asshole’ could entail that it is nondisplaceably inappropriate to even so much as mention such things in polite contexts.)

Another such anti-semanticist argument is what Pullum (2018) calls “the problem of unwanted tautologies” – e.g., *why doesn’t ‘Dykes are morally contemptible in virtue of their sexual orientation’ feel blatantly redundant? Semanticism entails that it should be a mere tautology, but it feels more substantive than that.* This just strikes me as a guise of the paradox of analysis. (‘A circle is a set of points equidistant from a center point’ also doesn’t feel blatantly redundant.)

⁷ That is, there is something notoriously oxymoronic about the very idea of a conventional implicature – of “a condition which is part of what the words ... *mean* without being part of what the words *say* ...” (Grice, 1989: 361). The very notion seeks to straddle the S/P interface in a controversial (and perhaps untenable) way. There is some inclination to say: if they are implicatures, then they ain’t semantic; and if they are conventional, then they ain’t pragmatic. Cf. Horn (2012: 82–5) for discussion.

to slurs with a complex relation to the S/P border are the attempts to account for the expressive powers of slurs via non-standard, non-traditional dimensions of meaning – such as Camp’s (2018) ‘perspectives’, Pullum’s (2018) ‘metadata’, or Diaz-Legaspe et al. (2020) ‘register’. These could be arguably categorized as ‘semanticist’, ‘non-semanticist’, or neither, depending on exactly how one characterizes the S/P distinction.

So, then: What exactly determines where one stands on this [semanticist – non-semanticist] spectrum? Two core, related pro-semanticist considerations which animate this present work are: first, that all three dimensions of a genuine use of a slur (categorization, derogation, and the ‘in virtue of’ relation) are non-cancellable⁸; and, second, that ignorance of any of these dimensions should be counted as ignorance of literal, linguistic meaning, as opposed to (say) a mistake about conditions for appropriate use. However, it is a task to even begin to justify these pro-semanticist premises: for, again, the notion of ‘meaning’, and the S/P interface to which the notion is tied, are notoriously difficult to talk about in a non-contentious way. There is simply no consensus as to exactly how to individuate linguistic meaning, exactly what goes on which side of the S/P divide.⁹

And if things are bad in general – in that the critical arguments rely on the pliable clay of semantic intuition – they are worse in particular for cases like slurs whose status at the S/P interface is especially controversial. Even Quine (1991) concedes that of course it is true that all bachelors are unmarried men, but no such consensus appears remotely likely for cases involving slurs (cf. note 2).

Those qualifications noted, I will sketch a working conception of the S/P interface, to help hone in on a precise question about the semantics of genuine uses of slurs. Among the candidate criteria for deciding whether something communicated should be factored as semantic or pragmatic – out of the many that have been proposed (cf. note 9) – I will rely on the cancellability test. Cancellability is given pride of place by Grice (1989: 39) as the first of five distinguishing features of conversational implicatures, and it is deemed “... the best of the tests” for pragmatic status by Sadock (1978: 284) in his thorough early assessment. (While criticisms of the test have emerged, for present purposes I will build on the consensus view that cancellability remains a significant reliable indicator at the S/P interface.¹⁰) In general, pragmatic implicature can be cancelled without contradiction, but semantic content cannot.

To illustrate, consider the example of Grice’s reference letter:

Dear Sir, Mr. X’s command of English is excellent, and his attendance at tutorials has been regular. Yours, etc. (1989: 33)

⁸ Cf. Williamson (2009: 150): “... someone who says ‘Lessing was Boche, though I do not mean to imply that Germans are cruel’ merely adds hypocrisy to xenophobia ...”.

⁹ In addition to slurs, there are plenty of other phenomena whose relation to the S/P interface is a matter of ongoing controversy. (Two others just came up: conventional implicatures and presuppositions.) Cf. Grice (1989), Bach (2004), Recanati (2004, 2010), Schlenker (2016) for discussion of various such cases.

¹⁰ For arguments in support of this consensus view, cf. Dahlman (2012), Haugh (2013), Sullivan (2017), Zakkou (2018).

In context, this letter implicates that, as Grice puts it:

[I] Mr. X is no good at philosophy.

As for the cancellability of the implicature, suppose that the letter had continued, after

“...has been regular”, to say:

[ICanc] Mr. X is also the most brilliant philosophical mind of his generation.

Although the result would be an odd reference letter, this revised letter would not implicate [I]. Contrast that with a letter which explicitly says ‘Mr. X is no good at philosophy’. In this case it would be decidedly beyond odd to attempt to take it back:

[*] Dear Sir, Mr. X is no good at philosophy, and is also good at philosophy.
Yours, etc.

So, as long as something is just pragmatically implicated (suggested, hinted at, etc.), it can be cancelled without contradiction. However, once it is on the semantic record, it cannot.

Presuppositions, entailments, and (at least some of the classic¹¹) conventional implicatures come out as non-cancellable, and hence as distinct from pragmatic implicatures, on this test:

- [*] X’s kangaroo is sick, and X has no kangaroo.
- [*] All humans are mortal, X is human, and X is not mortal.
- [*] X is poor but honest – and I do not mean to suggest that there is anything unexpected about being both poor and honest.

In contrast, not only particularized conversational implicatures, but also various other (more or less) paradigmatically pragmatic sorts of phenomena, pass the cancellability test:

- [Canc Generalized Conversational Implicature] X is meeting a woman this evening; she is X’s mother.
- [Canc Scalar] X has two children; in fact X has five of them.
- [Canc Enrichment] X and Y got married; X married Z and Y married W.

Henceforth, I assume that if something is cancellable, that is a strong reason to think that it belongs on the ‘pragmatic implicature’ side of the ledger, while if it is not, then that is a considerable reason to hold that it is constitutive of semantic content.

Now, then: what about an attempt to cancel the pejorative dimension of a slur?

[NCanc] I’m not a racist because I actually like niggers.

¹¹ Post-Bach (1999), the taxonomy of conventional implicatures gets complex. For example, while Bach (1999) concludes that there is no such thing as a conventional implicature; Potts (2005) and McCready (2010) retain the concept but uses it in slightly different senses than Grice (1989).

[DCanc] I'm no homophobe; I'm always saying you've really got to hand it to those dykes.

This isolates a critical question dividing semanticist from non-semanticist accounts of slurs. Basically, at the core, what drives my semanticism is the intuition that, provided that the slurs are genuinely used, such cases are not merely a bit odd (e.g., 'I have two children; in fact, I have three'), but more robustly contradictory. I will press the case that the incongruity which these constructions instance should be classified as a semantic anomaly.

4 Isolating the Semantic Dimensions of Slurs

4.1 Can the Pejorative Dimension of a Slur Be Cancelled?

Consider the following:

- [D-] Jane is an admirable, morally upstanding dyke.
- [N-] Al is a smart, honest, hardworking nigger.
- [B-] I'm so proud to call you my bitch.

Focus on a genuine use; and so imagine a xenophobic speaker singling out one member of the target group as exceptional (as opposed to, say, a mixed-quotations, echoic allusion sort of response to a xenophobe). For sure, these are all grating. I myself can only get a reading of [D-] and [N-] that is merely egregious as opposed to blatantly contradictory if the last word in the sentence is said softly; it won't bear stress. In that case, we might get a use without explicit malicious intent – unenlightened though not mean-spirited, as it were – but absence of malicious intent does not nullify semantic potential (cf. notes 1, 14). [B-] is a line from a hip-hop love ballad (Juicy J, "I Don't Mind", 2014, RCA Records). Again, while it is not hard to imagine a reading that is not intended to insult the addressee, that just goes to show how easy it is to imagine a misogynist background context.

Next, consider these:

- [CancCAT] Jane is a dyke and she's not homosexual.
- [CancDER] Jane is a dyke and she's not contemptible.
- [CancIVO] Jane is a dyke and she's not contemptible in virtue of being homosexual.

Again, assuming genuine use, these are all quite grating to semantic intuition. A coherent reading of [CancCAT] depends on reading the slur metaphorically (i.e., though Jane is in fact heterosexual, she resembles the operative stereotype). For the case of [CancDER], a search for a coherent reading inclines one towards a mixed-quotations, echoic allusion sort of response to a homophobe, and so away from a genuine use. Tellingly, [CancIVO] is the worst off of the three. It is hard

to imagine an intended reading involving a genuine use of the slur that could save [CancIVO] from the strong whiff of blatant contradiction.

Next, I turn to some objections. One runs as follows: "... if the pejorative content were understood in terms of a list of stereotypical features, it could be clearly cancellable, as in:

(*) Maria is a dyke but she is not masculine and anti-mainstream, and she does not have
an explicit desire for women.

This objection oversimplifies the situation in multiple ways. First, surely there is nothing contradictory about a non-stereotypical member of the target group. (A mainstream, effeminate homosexual woman, say, would hardly be of special interest to modal metaphysicians!) But, more deeply, the whole spirit of the objection flies in the face of descriptive ineffability – i.e., the widely conceded point that there is something particularly amorphous and shifty about the semantic potential of slurring terms. A consequence is that it is just not possible to put a cat at every mousehole, in the way to which this objection aspires. The objection relies on the false presumption that the pejorative dimension of a slur can be straightforwardly decomposed into an exhaustive list of discrete factors.

Another objection: anti-semanticists can and should hold that slurs have felicity conditions, and felicity conditions are non-cancellable; therefore, the above pro-semanticist considerations are de-fanged. The idea is that the above eight examples (from [NCanc] to [CancIVO]) are analogous to the following sorts of cases:

[christen] I christen this ship "the Minnow"; even though it is not my ship and I have no right to do so.
[know] John is in the kitchen but I don't know where he is.

These instance performative incoherence, not semantic anomaly – the infelicity has no direct, immediate bearing on the semantics of 'christen' or 'know'. Similarly, according to this line of thought, for the non-cancellability of the pejorative dimension of a slur. It is simply a mistake to try to draw semantic conclusions from it.

Well, sure, felicity conditions are also non-cancellable. But that does not entail either that there is no significant distinction between performative incoherence and semantic anomaly, or that any of the above eight examples (from [NCanc] to [CancIVO]) ought to be classified as performative incoherence. To the contrary, there are glaring disanalogies between these 'christen'/'know' cases and the preceding attempts to cancel the pejorative dimension of a slur. Note, for starters, that no one was ever tempted to tell an 'implicature' story about felicity conditions. They are not an aspect or component of the content communicated with an utterance, about which there arises the question of whether they ought to be categorized as semantically expressed or pragmatically implicated. Rather, they are pre-conditions for performing certain sorts of speech acts in the first place.

So, felicity conditions are pre-semantic, in a fairly clear sense. Like disambiguation or the saturation of indexicals,¹² such things are conceptually prior to more squarely semantic (let alone pragmatic) questions. In this respect, then, one of these things is rather not like the others:

[NCanc] I'm not a racist because I like niggers.

[CancIVO] Jane is a dyke and she's not contemptible in virtue of being homosexual.

[christen] I christen this ship "the Minnow"; even though it is not mine and I have no right to do so.

The problem with the latter is a failure of an institutional pre-condition; the problem with the former two is, relatively, much more clearly on the semantic level. It is what they express that is problematic; not a violation of what ought to be in place for them to occur in the first place. Hence, I do not see much promise in this suggested anti-semanticist rebuttal.

For my part, I find all eight examples (from [NCanc] to [CancIVO]) to go decidedly beyond taking-back-something-merely-suggested. This strongly suggests that the pejorative content is not just hinted at or implicated, when a slur is genuinely used. Not all readers' semantic intuitions will deliver exactly the same verdict (cf. note 2). At the very least, then, the cases starkly isolate the contrast between semanticist and non-semanticist accounts of slurs.

4.2 What Kind of Mistake is Ignorance of the Derogatory Aspect of a Slur?

Here is a supplementary semanticist line of thought. Consider Arnauld, who was barely fluent in English when he moved to the UK in the 1980s. He acquired the term 'Paki', and while quickly competent with the categorization dimension (i.e., short for 'Pakistani', vaguely applicable to a broad class of south Asians), he was for some time unaware that the term was commonly used as a slur. After a couple of awkward interchanges, Arnauld caught on and wised up.¹³

During the stage at which he was categorically-competent with the term, but ignorant of any other dimensions, is Arnauld's deficiency a semantic one or a pragmatic one? How should the error of mistaking a slur for a non-pejorative term be understood?

Kaplan (2004) discusses a relevant distinction, between "properly linguistic conventions" and "other kinds of convention that govern the use of language". Only properly linguistic conventions are semantically relevant; lots of other norms which govern linguistic behavior should not be so-classified. Kaplan's example of a non-semantic convention is that, before participating in a receiving line at Buckingham Palace, one is instructed that "one is not allowed to ask a question of the Queen".

¹² Cf., e.g., Grice's (1989: 25) discussion of interpreting an utterance of 'He is in the grip of a vice'.

¹³ The preceding is based on a true story, in fact relayed to me by a colleague as auto-biographical. I take it that such cases occur more or less commonly.

This is surely a convention, a norm whose recognition regulates a range of linguistic behavior; but it is not a semantically relevant one. There is a rather massive difference between Kaplan's asking Queen Elizabeth II "Who does your hair?" (which would violate this rule of proper usage) vs. his saying to her "17 is heavier than Tuesday" (which would violate properly semantic norms).

On what side of Kaplan's divide, then, does Arnauld's error belong? The semanticist position is that the critical missing piece is really unlike Kaplan's conventions of proper usage. It is not merely that Arnauld is employing an instrument which is contextually inappropriate; rather, Arnauld is mistaken as to precisely which instrument he is employing. What Arnauld is blind to is an aspect of linguistic meaning, as opposed to a rule of linguistic usage.

Or, consider: it is familiar to distinguish semantic incompetence from pragmatic incompetence. Examples of semantic incompetence (again from Kaplan (2004)) include: thinking that a massively spacious kitchen could accurately be called a 'kitchenette', or thinking that 'fortnight' means '40 nights'. Such kinds of mistakes about meaning prevail among children and foreigners learning a new language. In contrast, pragmatic incompetence involves things like having an unusual, atypical amount of trouble identifying and interpreting non-literal usage – e.g., not getting sarcasm, metaphors, puns, etc. Pragmatic Language Impairment was first recognized in the DSM-5 in 2013, and is getting ever progressively better integrated into cognitive psychology and neuroscience.

Again: Arnauld's error seems much more akin to semantic incompetence, and rather different from pragmatic impairment. Arnauld does not lack context-specific mind-reading skills; what he lacks is knowledge of meaning.¹⁴

4.3 Color, Conventional Implicatures, and Complex Constructions

Next, consider Frege's differences of 'color' (his examples include 'and' vs. 'but', or referring to a horse as 'nag' vs. 'steed'). Frege treats such differences as logically irrelevant, and so as a mere theoretical nuisance. For example, Frege (1918: 23) says that such color-changes involve hinting at – but not expressing – different contents; Frege (1892: 73) says that interchanging differently colored expressions "[does] not change the thought but only illuminate it in a peculiar fashion". A certain classic conception of the S/P interface would count such color differences as non-truth-conditional and hence pragmatic.

Grice's position on conventional implicature is not far off Frege's view of color. One canonical case (Grice, 1989: 25) concerns an utterance of: "He is an

¹⁴ An anonymous referee has charged that "people who are not racists or homophobes but are completely unconscious of the prejudicial ways in which they talk about certain groups" pose a problem for the arguments of this paper. To the contrary, semanticists can and should count such people as (like Arnauld) semantically incompetent. They are blind to a dimension of the meaning of the terms they utter; whether out of ignorance or unconcern makes little difference. (Compare: *I have decided to henceforth just call all green vegetables 'broccoli', and let the chips fall where they may.* For the rest of us, trying to cooperatively communicate as best we can, such a speaker is practically equivalent to someone making an honest mistake.)

Englishman; he is, therefore, brave”, which Grice factors into the semantic content (i.e., the subject is said to be both English and brave) and the conventional implicature carried by ‘therefore’ (i.e., all Englishmen are brave). Grice’s view is that conventional implicatures are truth-conditionally irrelevant: “I do not want to say that my utterance ... would be ... false should the [implicature] in question fail to hold” (1989: 25); “... we seem to have a condition which is part of what the words ... mean without being part of what the words say ...” (1989: 361).

Ever since Bach (1999) first pressed the point, it is more and more widely acknowledged that this classic Frege-Grice position falls prey to embedding data:

It seems that Grice overlooked [certain things] because he almost never investigated embedded examples. In general, he used only monoclausal utterances ... (Potts, 2005: 213).

Relatedly, Picardi (2006) holds that Frege’s position on ‘color’ would have been exposed as implausible if he had considered this kind of complex construction:

[Frege] overlooked ... that coloring is not, as a rule, cancelled out in reported speech and in sentential embeddings ... (2006: 62).

So, consider:

[E-snob] John is a snob because he thinks that the janitor is poor but honest.
 [E-nag] If Rusty is a nag then don’t waste that much money on him; but if he’s a steed
 then he’s worth the price.

In complex constructions, what might otherwise be thought to be non-truth-conditional gets ensnared into the truth-conditional content. Hence, color issues and (classic) conventional implicatures can affect truth-conditions. On a view that puts stock in cancellability, that suggests that they are a dimension of semantic content.

An analogous argument for semanticism about slurs is available, exploiting the evident similarities between color, conventional implicature, and the pejorative dimension of a slur. Suppose John says:

[E-N] I would never vote for Obama because he is a nigger.

We can all agree, I think, that there are contexts in which it is permissible for me to report that:

[E-B] John said that he won’t vote for Obama because he is black.

(Among other things, there are worries about ‘derogatory autonomy’ (cf. note 1) – i.e., a reporter who tokens a slur, even inside the scope of an other-attributing operator like “X said that ...”, might nonetheless be taken to endorse xenophobic views.) However, there are clearly contexts in which that report would be misleading, because the aspect of [E-N] that [E-B] white-washes might be centrally relevant.

(For example, if what is at issue is John's inclination towards racism, then [E-B] is misleading.¹⁵)

Even further, there are contexts in which [E-B] would be decidedly worse than merely misleading. Suppose John holds a public office, and allegations arise accusing him of racism. I am called to testify. The question comes up: "Have you and John ever discussed Barrack Obama's political campaign?" In this context, there is some reason to think that [E-B] may semantically express something inapt and inaccurate.

Again, we are dealing with some rather peripheral semantic intuitions here; I do not expect unanimous agreement about the aptness, accuracy, or truth-conditions of [E-N] vs. [E-B] (cf. note 2). Still, I rest content with the safer claim, sufficient for present purposes, that there is a tight analogy between [E-N] vs. [E-B], on the one hand, and on the other hand the (snobbery-culpatory) claim that John thinks that X is poor but honest vs. the (not-snobbery-culpatory) claim that John thinks that X is poor and honest.¹⁶ The intuition that [E-B] would be inappropriate in that scenario is as strong as an analogous case about a classic conventional implicature (i.e., attributing a claim of "poor and honest" to someone who actually said "poor but honest").

The point generalizes; it does not rely on anything unusual about this particular case. The literature abounds with similar examples – e.g., "Institutions that treats Jews as kikes are morally depraved" (from Hom (2008)); "I'll betcha they hire a chink and a dyke before they even consider a white guy" (from Camp (2018)); etc. Such complex constructions illustrate the multiple semantic dimensions of a genuine use of a slur, because of the way in which the pejorative dimension gets ensnared within the compositional semantic machinery. Therefore, they help to motivate semanticism about slurs.

5 Conclusion

I have tried to bolster the case in favor of holding that the pejorative dimension of a slur is a constituent element of its linguistic meaning, and hence, slurs instance a distinctive kind of meaning, not merely of use. At the core of my arguments lie these

¹⁵ Crucially, [E-B] is not irredeemably xenophobic. Suppose John is a strategic voter whose first choice for President is Obama, and who thinks it would be wonderful if the US had a black President, but thinks that Obama has no realistic chance of winning the election. So, John might strategically vote for his second choice. [E-B] might be apt, while [E-N], and the charge of racism, are not. (Note also that this does not rely on any simple, straightforward relation between constraints on belief reports and the exact contents of the reported beliefs.)

¹⁶ In the terms of Sennett and Copp (2015), what I am running here is a substitution argument for semanticism. I am not moved by their dismissal of such arguments (in §5.1), as it is premised on a position on classic conventional implicatures which I find problematic. Roughly: [P1] you can run a substitution argument on 'and' vs. 'but', just as surely as you can run one on a slur and its neutral counterpart; [P2] it is not clear that semantics ought to distinguish 'and' from 'but'; ergo [C] substitutivity arguments are inconclusive. Their [P2], while endorsed by the titans from Frege to Grice, would be counted by many contemporaries (in the wake of Bach (1999), Potts (2005), Picardi (2006), McCready (2010), etc.) as resting on thin ice.

two commitments: [1] the pejorative dimension of a slur is not cancellable, [2] cancellability is a significant indicator at the S/P interface. Either could be rejected; but my view is that, all things considered, both deserve credence. If you concede both, you're well on your way to a semanticist account of slurs.

Again: one present point is merely that some too-quick arguments for anti-semanticism are premised on holding slurs to an unreasonably high standard – i.e., semanticists must either come up with a comprehensive, defensible account of a slur's semantic content, or else give it up. I do not find that stricture to be any more convincing or justified than would be a similar demand posed against Socrates on 'justice', or Moore on 'good' (cf. note 3).

As of yet, this leaves open some rather large questions: What, then, exactly is the semantic content of a slur? How do we account for all of the complex and distinctive properties of slurs? Grappling with that problem is of a piece with the gradual unpacking of a point engaged with in increments by, say, Kaplan (2004), Potts (2005), Camp (2012), Pullum (2018), Diaz-Legaspe et al. (2020), among many others: Namely, there are more distinct and diverse dimensions to literal linguistic meaning than had been envisaged in most of traditional philosophy of language. That work is ongoing.

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