

Loaded Words: On the Semantics and Pragmatics of Slurs^{*}

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People use slurs to put others down. The slang word ‘diss’ aptly evokes the range of attitudes people use slurs to express, such as disrespect and disgust, and the range of things speakers use slurs to do, like disparage and dismiss. I’ll be discussing the meaning of terms used to slur people on the basis of such things as race, ethnicity, nationality, class, religion, ideology, gender, and sexual orientation.

There are many mean and nasty things to say about mean and nasty talk, but I don’t plan on saying any of them. There’s a specific problem about slurring words that I want to address. This is a semantic problem. It’s not very important compared to the real-world problems presented by bigotry, racism, discrimination, and worse. It’s important only to linguistics and the philosophy of language.

A solution to this semantic problem needs to identify what, as a matter of linguistic meaning, is added by referring to someone with a slurring word rather than its neutral counterpart, for example with ‘kike’ rather than ‘Jew.’ And why does using the slur have the effect it has? Is it because using ‘kike’ violates a norm against using it, because using it is offensive, because it has an additional expressive meaning, or because it has some additional descriptive content lacking in its neutral counterpart? According to the solution I’m inclined to endorse, it does indeed have extra descriptive content. Any other way of explaining how ‘kike’ differs from ‘Jew’ is anti-semantic.

1. Some stipulations and observations

Before proceeding, let’s make a couple of terminological stipulations. First of all, for efficiency’s sake I will use noun ‘slur’, rather than ‘slurring word’, for words used to slur (and not for acts of using them). Also, let’s distinguish *group* slurs from *personal* slurs,

* Thanks to Louise Antony and Robin Jeshion for their comments, presented in April 2014 at the Pacific APA meeting in San Diego, on an earlier version of this paper, and to David Braun, David Copp, and Robert May for discussing many key questions raised by slurs.

for example ‘kike’ and ‘Commie’ from ‘charlatan’ and ‘asshole’.¹ Since our topic is group slurs, I will generally use the word ‘slur’ to refer to them. Finally, I will say that a group slur *applies* or *is applied* to members of the relevant group, that is, to people denoted by the slur’s neutral counterpart term. I do this in order to leave open the question of whether the term is or is not *true* of the group’s members. In this way, I won’t prejudice the discussion for or against views that say, or imply, that a group slur is true of whomever its neutral counterpart is true of. I will also say that people to whom such terms are applied are the term’s *target*, again leaving open whether the term is true of any of its targets. Interestingly, whereas group slurs all seem to have neutral counterparts, it seems that many personal slurs, like ‘jerk’, ‘dweeb’, and ‘punk’, do not. Some are even hard to find neutral paraphrases for.²

Now for a few observations about slurs. First, they are usually slang words. (For that reason alone, slurs tend not to be used in polite company, even among bigots of “good breeding.”) But not all slang terms for particular groups are slurs. Some, like ‘Brit’ and ‘Aussie’, are merely nicknames. Slurs can become more or less derogatory and offensive over time (linguists call these processes *pejoration* and *melioration*). Also, for what it’s worth, it seems that group slurs generally don’t have adjectival forms. For example, there’s ‘Jewish’ but not ‘kikish’ and ‘French’ but not ‘Froggish’.

Group slurs are applied to particular individuals on the basis of group membership rather than anything special about the person in particular. They are applied across the board, indiscriminately, to members of the group in question, generally by nonmembers. It seems that the widespread use of a slur is based on stereotyping and built on prejudice, and helps perpetuate both. Using a slur serves to focus attention on, and to discourage emotional responsiveness to features beyond the target’s putative generic features, features which are treated as highly explanatory of stereotypical character and behavior.

The fact that slurs are slang words is enough to make their use offensive to some people. But obviously this is not the main reason that using a slur is generally offensive,

¹ The latter is the worthy subject of two recent books, James 2012 and Nunberg 2012.

² Speaking of neutral counterparts of slurs, they too can be used pejoratively, when uttered with a certain contemptuous intonation or when used with certain adjectives, like ‘dirty’ and ‘stupid’, or with expressive intensifiers like ‘goddam’ and ‘fuckin’. However, a group slur differs in meaning from that of a contemptuously pronounced or an expletive-modified neutral counterpart, since the latter can be applied selectively, to only some members of the group.

either to its target or, in a different way, to those who do not share the attitudes of the person using the slur. People don't appreciate being insulted or spoken ill of, and people don't care to be presumed to endorse such talk and whatever prejudices and practices lurk behind it. And, as is often observed, even mentioning (as opposed to using) certain slurs can be offensive. With the so-called N-word, a particularly toxic example, discussions of the term's use and quotations of particular utterances of it may employ euphemisms (like 'the N-word') rather than mention the word itself. And there is one other aspect to the offensiveness of a slur, especially if it is associated with an extensive history of pernicious attitudes and practices. Its use, and even its mention, is an in-your-face reminder of that history and, indeed, of the very fact that there exists a slurring word for the group in question. After all, not every group is so honored. When a group is accorded a proprietary slur, its users deem the practice of using it justified by some imagined deficiency inherent in members of the group.

One way to begin to think about our main semantic question about slurs is to mull over this non-semantic question. Sticking with our illustrative example, what's the difference, if any, between being a Jew and being a kike?³ That has several possible answers, none satisfactory, as we will see in due course. One answer, based on the supposition that a kike is a contemptible Jew (or something to that effect), is that only some Jews, the contemptible ones, are kikes. Here's another answer: all Jews are kikes. This suggests that there's no difference between being a Jew and being a kike. That could be either because all Jews have whatever it takes to be a kike, or because there's nothing more to being a kike than being a Jew. On the latter view, Jews are kikes, but that proposition is trivial and innocuous: 'Jew' and 'kike' semantically express the same properties all right, but that isn't really objectionable if the only relevant difference is that between *calling* certain people kikes and *calling* them Jews. In that case the difference is arguably merely pragmatic, not semantic. Here's a third answer: no Jews are kikes (Hom and May 2013). If that's right, then calling a Jew a kike is a "misdénommer," to borrow a term from the World's Foremost Authority, Professor Irwin Corey.⁴ Let's keep these

³ A distinct question for later (and perhaps more to the point) is this: what's the difference, if any, between believing that someone is a Jew and believing that he's a kike?

⁴ Professor Irwin Corey is a centenarian Jewish comedian, not a professor:
<http://classicshowbiz.blogspot.com/2013/09/an-interview-with-professor-irwin-corey.html>

three answers in mind as we proceed.

Now, rather than go through all the available views on the semantics of slurs, I will go directly, in the next section, to the view I wish to propose, what I call *loaded descriptivism*. It says that a slur has a component of descriptive meaning in addition to its classifying meaning. It's intended as an improvement on the popular view known as *hybrid expressivism*, so-called because it views the second component of the meaning of a slur as expressive rather than descriptive.⁵ The two will be compared in the section after next.

2. Loaded descriptivism

Group slurs are applied to, whether or not they are true of, the same individuals that their neutral counterparts are applied to, thus playing the same categorizing role. But that's not all they do. According to loaded descriptivism, they have an additional descriptive content. The meaning of a group slur includes not only the descriptive content of its neutral counterpart but also a generic side comment, applied to members of the target group indiscriminately. But exactly what is this extra element, and what is its semantic status?

One suggestion is that it attributes a stereotype to members of the target group. Now even if a stereotype plays a role in some people's uses of some slurs, an obvious problem with such a view is that it seems to entail that a slur means different things to different speakers if they associate a different stereotype with it. And what if a slur has no stereotype associated with it at all? In any case, it seems that speakers can use and understand slurs perfectly well without knowing the prevailing stereotype, if indeed there is one, and without agreeing on what it is. Having unorthodox reasons for thinking ill of people of a certain group does not betray misunderstanding or misuse of a slurring word for them (see Jeshion 2013b, "Slurs and Stereotypes").

A further problematic feature for the stereotype view is that slurs for different groups will have different extra meanings, depending on the stereotype (even assuming there is one and only one) for a given group. It seems to me that different slurs have the same

⁵ As far as I know, the phrase 'hybrid expressivism' originated in metaethics, referring to the view that the meanings of moral terms have both descriptive (or "cognitive") and expressive components.

additional meaning, regardless of which group each targets. Specific (mis-)information about a group may be relevant to a bigot's reasons for using a slur and useful for anyone trying to make sense of others' use of it, but this does not bear on the slur's meaning. To learn a new slur for a group, a speaker has to learn merely which group it applies to and, at least in effect, that it is a group slur. But what does the latter amount to?

What, then, do slurs for groups have in common? Let 'S' be a slur for Gs (people in a group G). The additional element of meaning that distinguishes 'S' from its neutral counterpart 'G' is something along the lines of the proposition that Gs are contemptible in virtue of being Gs. I say "something along the lines of" because, although singling out the property of being contemptible (or being worthy of contempt) is popular among descriptivists, this particular property is, as Liz Camp has observed, "overly specific." It is a mistake, she explains, to "assign a single affectively defined property like 'contemptible' to all slurs," or even to "different uses of the same slur" (Camp 2013: 339). The same goes for evaluate properties. Accordingly, our conception of the requisite negative evaluative property should be unspecific enough to be compatible with any of at least the following properties (insofar as these are all distinct from one another): being abominable, despicable, detestable, disgusting, inferior, loathsome, offensive, repugnant, subhuman, or vile.⁶ I will use 'contemptible' for purposes of illustration, but I don't take the second part of the meaning of a slur to be that specific. This component is conveniently unspecific as to the negative attribute being ascribed (and the corresponding attitude being expressed) with the use of the slur. Nor is any specific justification or rationale built into this component, none, that is, other than what, in the view of enthusiastic users of the slur, is inherent in belonging to the group. It's as if the group constitutes an evaluative natural kind.

What is the semantic status of the derogatory component of a slur, and how does it tie with the primary, classificatory component, the meaning that it shares with its neutral counterpart? Take the slur 'kike'. To describe a particular person as a kike, or to directly call someone a kike, imputes two properties to that person, one directly and one by

⁶ So I would not endorse characterizations anywhere near as specific as the moral properties suggested by Hom and May, such as "ought to be the object of negative moral evaluation" (2013: 295) or "ought to be treated negatively" (2013: 300). Indeed, the loosely specified extra evaluative property does not have to be specifically moral in character.

implication. Only one of these properties serves to categorize the person, in this case that of being Jewish. The other amounts to a side comment about Jews in general, and by implication about that person in particular. Loaded descriptivism says that the meaning of a slur has two components, a categorizing part and a supplementary evaluative part, which is a function of the categorization.⁷ For example, the semantic content of ‘kike’ includes the property of being Jewish and the property of being contemptible in virtue of being Jewish. To put it simply, to be a kike is to be a Jew, hence to be contemptible. But that’s putting it a bit too simply.

Suppose Jacob is a Jew, and an anti-Semite utters (1),

(1) Jacob is a kike.

Is this true or false? Is it or is it not the case that Jacob is a kike? On the one hand, you might say, yes, he is a kike, since the word ‘kike’, notwithstanding its derogatory force, does manage to distinguish Jews from non-Jews. On the other hand, you might say, “No, though Jewish he is not a kike” (perhaps because you agree with me that being a kike requires being contemptible for being Jewish). In the recent debate about slurs, some lean one way, some the other.⁸ In my view, one shouldn’t have to decide – having to say “Yes” or “No” to a statement made with a sentence like (1) is a forced choice that one should resist making.

To appreciate why, consider the case of nonrestrictive relative clauses. Suppose someone assertively utters (2),

(2) Buffalo Bill, who was born in Buffalo, was a great showman.

If you know that Buffalo Bill was born in Le Claire, Iowa, you can’t very well say, “That’s true.” On the other hand, you can’t say “That’s not true” without being taken to deny that Buffalo Bill was a great showman. The problem here is that (2) expresses two propositions, each true or false independently of the other, while your use of ‘that’ is

⁷ For present purposes I count evaluative content as a kind of descriptive content. That’s because I don’t think semantics should mark the difference, which strikes me as metaphysical, between evaluative and non-evaluative content. But I realize that this is a controversial issue among metaethicists.

⁸ Compare, for example, the judgments of Sennet and Copp (2015) and those of Hom and May (2013) on the truth-values of a variety of sentences containing slurs.

naturally taken to refer to only one of them.⁹ The proposition you accept, that Buffalo Bill was a great showman, is the main content of (2), or what Potts (2005) would call its *at-issue* content, and the proposition you reject is that Buffalo Bill was born in Buffalo, expressed by the nonrestrictive relative clause, is the secondary or *supplementary* content of (2).¹⁰

Something similar happens with slurs, except for one thing. Sentences containing slurs also have a secondary propositional content, but with them that secondary content is not given separate linguistic expression – it’s loaded into the slur. This makes it even harder to deny directly than the content of a nonrestrictive relative clause. If you say, “Jacob is not a kike” (the internal negation of (1) above), you will be taken as denying merely that Jacob is a Jew.¹¹ You won’t be taken as objecting to the proposition that Jews inherently deserve contempt (or anything of the sort).

Anti-Semites, convinced that to be Jewish is to be inherently contemptible, regard the question whether someone is a kike as the same question as whether that person is a Jew. For them that’s the only proposition at issue. Everyone else should reject the question. You don’t have to buy into loaded descriptivism to agree with this. You could resist the question because of the attitude about Jews that a speaker of (1) expresses, either by virtue of its expressive meaning or because the act of using it is objectionable. However, according to loaded descriptivism the problem with assessing (1) for truth or falsity, and why we resist doing this, is its misleadingly simple predicative form. Just recall our non-semantic question raised earlier: what’s the difference, if any, between being a Jew and being a kike? From the perspective of loaded descriptivism, this is a misguided question. On the one hand, one just has to be Jew; on the other hand, being a kike requires that being Jewish inherently involves being contemptible. Since there are actually two

⁹I used (in Bach 1999) the case of nonrestrictive relative clauses to motivate the idea that sentences can have multiple propositional contents. I proposed that sentences containing words like ‘but’, ‘therefore’, and ‘too’ do likewise. Potts (2005) develops a formal, multi-dimensional semantic framework for handling various kinds of sentences with such contents.

¹⁰Nonrestrictive relative clauses are one case of what Potts terms *supplements*, a category that also includes many appositives and parentheticals.

¹¹Indeed, as Camp observes, disagreeing in this way “if anything compounds the slur’s offensiveness against Jews: it exempts [Jacob] from a derogatory way of thinking that is implicitly taken to be warranted for Jews in general. So we cannot use [‘Jacob is not a kike’] to reject (1) unless we want to buy into that perspective ourselves” (Camp 2013: 330).

separate propositions to be considered, it is a mistake to suppose that a sentence like (1) has a single truth-value. Like a sentence containing a nonrestrictive relative clause but in a compressed way, it expresses two independent propositions, not one conjunctive proposition.¹²

Given loaded descriptivism's conception of the meaning of a slur, what does using a slur do? Notice first that just for the purpose of categorizing someone, using a slur does no more than using its neutral counterpart. To that extent the slur is "useless" (to use Jennifer Hornsby's (2001) term). If you just want to put someone in a certain ethnic category, using a word like 'kike' has no additional classificatory value – using its neutral counterpart will do just fine. However, including the side comment contained in the slur has, at least according to the anti-Semite, a useful explanatory value. It points to why "those people" are the way they are.

Such as it is (it isn't much), this but the beginning of an explanation. As irrational as anti-Semitism and other kinds of bigotry are, they do have a degree of inner coherence. That's because, as (e.g.) the anti-Semite sees it, there's something about Jews that makes them the way they are, which explains their unsavory character and objectionable behavior. They are contemptible by nature. The anti-Semite doesn't need a real theory here; he's content with a locus and focus of explanation.

Indeed, his skeleton of a theory can be a bit tolerant, if not quite coherent. For despite his opinion of Jews in general, the anti-Semite can make exceptions. He can even deny that he's really anti-Semitic by insisting that some of his best friends are Jewish. However, his reluctance to *call* them kikes does not mean that by his lights they aren't kikes. Rather, this anti-Semite is giving them a pass. He thinks they have special qualities, overriding being Jewish, that exempt them from the way that kikes normally should be regarded and treated.

These familiar facts about the psychology of bigotry fit in nicely with our earlier observation that no particular basis for attributing contemptibility is built into the meaning of a word like 'kike'. The word itself does not mean different things to anti-Semites who harbor different stereotypes of Jews. Besides, people who are not anti-

¹²This consideration undercuts the debate between Hom and May (2013; this volume) and Sennet and Copp (2015) on the truth-values and other semantic properties of a variety of sentences containing slurs and, in particular, on whether a word like 'kike' has a null or non-null extension.

Semitic and don't use the word are still perfectly capable of understanding anti-Semites' uses of it.

3. Loaded descriptivism vs. hybrid expressivism

Loaded descriptivism is proposed here as an improvement on the popular view known as hybrid expressivism, so-called because it views the second component of the meaning of a slur as expressive rather than descriptive.¹³ On this view, slurs have the same descriptive contents as their neutral counterparts, and what distinguishes them is an expressive component: to call someone a kike is to call him a Jew and to express contempt for him (or for Jews generally) for being Jewish. This view is very appealing, given the fact that users of slurs generally do indeed express contempt or some such attitude.

Hybrid expressivism also has a linguistic motivation. It comports with the fact that the additional content of a slur tends to be projective.¹⁴ That is, it generally “scopes out” of such linguistic contexts as clausal complements of attitude verbs, antecedents of conditionals, and the scope of negation and of modals, as in sentences like these:

- (3) Jack thinks that Jacob is a kike.
- (4) If Jacob is a kike, he's stingy.
- (5) Jacob is not a kike.
- (6) Perhaps Jacob is a kike.

So, for example, all that (3) says Jack thinks is that Jacob is a Jew, and all that (6) says that Jacob might be is a Jew. In each case, the additional content, allegedly expressive, is

¹³Although hybrid expressivism denies that slurs make more of a truth-conditional contribution than their neutral counterparts (it is not a “semantic” view in Sennet and Copp's (2015) sense), it is still a semantic view of slurs, at least on a broader conception of semantics that allows for non-truth-conditional conventional meanings. Clearly such a conception is needed to handle exclamatives like ‘Ow!’ and ‘Wow!’ and adjectival epithets like ‘damn’ and ‘friggin’, which have what Potts calls “expressive contents” (2005: ch. 5). Only a pragmatic view of slurs, such as Bolinger's (2015) and Nunberg's (2016), holds that a slur and its neutral counterpart are fully equivalent semantically, differing only in what a speaker implicates or otherwise indicates by choosing to use the slur. I'd endorse pragmatism myself were it not my view that the attitudes, practices, and institutions that have given uses of slurs their force haven't also given slurs their meanings. This is obviously too big a metasemantic issue to take up here.

¹⁴The topic of projective content is very complex. For an in-depth study and taxonomy of the varieties of projective contents, see Tonhauser et al. (2013).

said to be, in Potts' (2005) terminology, *speaker-oriented*.¹⁵ Interestingly, however, scoping out tends to occur also with nonrestrictive relative clauses, as in these variants of (2):

- (7) Jack thinks that Buffalo Bill, who was born in Buffalo, was a great showman.
- (8) If Buffalo Bill, who was born in Buffalo, was a great showman, he was popular.
- (9) It is not true that Buffalo Bill, who was born in Buffalo, was a great showman.
- (10) Perhaps Buffalo Bill, who was born in Buffalo, was a great showman.

In each case one would naturally take a speaker to be categorically asserting the secondary proposition that Buffalo Bill was born in Buffalo. So the fact that the derogatory force of slurs scopes out, to the extent that it is a fact,¹⁶ does not support hybrid expressivism over loaded descriptivism.

Hybrid expressivism, despite its appeal, also has problems. For one thing, it entails that anyone who is a Jew is a kike. In response to this worry, its proponents have to argue that it is *saying* that someone is a kike, or *calling* someone a kike, that explains our reluctance to accept that anyone who is a Jew is a kike or, in particular, assuming that Jacob is Jewish, that Jacob is a kike. They also have to argue that any difference between believing that Jacob is a Jew and believing that Jacob is a kike is not a difference in what one believes.

Another problem, at least from the standpoint of loaded descriptivism, is that hybrid expressivism's explanation of the import of slurs gets the order of explanation backwards. Using a slur expresses contempt (or some such attitude) not as a matter of meaning but because it imputes contemptibility to members of the target group. Yes, there is a big difference between calling someone a Jew and calling them a kike, but the difference consists in what is imputed (contemptibility) and only derivatively in what (contempt) is thereby expressed.

Even so, it might seem that expressing contempt, not imputing contemptibility, for

¹⁵ The notion of speaker-orientation is tricky. For example, as I have argued (in Bach 2006), expressives are speaker-oriented in a more radical way than are supplements. Whereas using a supplement, such as a nonrestrictive relative clause, is to express an attitude (a belief) with a shareable content, expressing a feeling is not.

¹⁶ See Harris and Potts 2009 for attested exceptions to the rule, involving both adjectival epithets and nominal appositives (these are similar to nonrestrictive relative clauses).

being in the target group, is what makes the act of using a slur offensive and, assuming that it is the job of a semantic account of slurs to explain this, that this is better explained by hybrid expressivism. I'm not sure how this story is supposed to go. It seems to me that for a speaker to impute contemptibility for being in a certain group is itself offensive, as well as explanatory of the speaker's expression of contempt. Also, using a slur isn't offensive to people who share contempt for the target group and find the expression of such contempt perfectly acceptable. For that matter, sometimes contempt is warranted and so is its expression. That's because assholes, pimps, and shysters *are* contemptible and in some contexts deserve to be described or even addressed in a way that implies that.

A further problem for hybrid expressivism is its trouble in accounting for the fact that including a slur rather than its neutral counterpart in an attitude report can sometimes add to the accuracy of the report. Consider how you would naturally take an utterance of either of these sentences:

(11) Dick thought that Henry was a kraut and Zbig was a Polack.

(12) As far as Dick was concerned, Henry was a kraut and Zbig was a Polack.¹⁷

In either case the reporter is not expressing contempt but is, rather, attributing an imputation of contemptibility to the subject, in this case Dick. Hybrid expressivism, since it predicts that expressiveness always scopes out of embedded contexts, is not equipped to account for all that is being reported. To be sure, using a slur in a speech or belief report, even if one is not expressing contempt, can still be offensive.¹⁸ Even so, the reporter is using the slur literally without expressing contempt (or any such attitude).

We saw earlier that hybrid expressivism seem to entail that, e.g., anyone who is a German is a kraut. The examples of (11) and (12) suggest that it cannot accommodate the apparent fact that there's a difference, indeed a big difference, between believing that someone is a German and believing that someone is a kraut. To be sure, in believing the

¹⁷ It is more difficult to get this effect in indirect quotations. That's because in examples like 'Dick said that/According to Dick, Henry was a kraut and Zbig was a Polack', it is natural to take the occurrences of the slurs as directly quoted, as part of so-called mixed quotations.

¹⁸ Here we should distinguish the slur's role in the report from the effect of its mere utterance. Also, a speaker can eliminate or at least reduce the offensiveness of a reporting use by offering a disclaimer in advance: "I don't mean to offend anyone – I am just trying to report accurately".

latter, say about Henry, one is not directly attributing an additional property to him but is, rather, saying something generic, about what is inherent in being German.

4. What Loaded Descriptivism Doesn't Do

Before getting to what I take to be the main objections to loaded descriptivism, I will briefly mention several possible objections each of which requires loaded descriptivism to do something that it does need to do or purport to do. Responding to them should help clarify what it does do.

One such objection is that loaded descriptivism provides no semantic role for the stereotype associated with a given slur. I consider this a virtue. For, as mentioned earlier, it is doubtful that each slur has a stereotype associated with it and, if it does, only one. Moreover, even if there is exactly one stereotype associated with a given slur, it does not seem that a speaker unfamiliar with that stereotype has deficient understanding of the slur. This merely shows lack of understanding of the rationale, such as it is, underlying the use of the term. You don't have to be familiar with the bigoted pretext that rationalizes the existence and use of the term in order to understand it.

By the same token, it is no objection that loaded descriptivism does not explain various other things that, though characteristic of the use of slurs (and in some cases of practices, personal or even institutional, underlying their use), are not due to their meaning. For example, loaded descriptivism doesn't explain why applying a slur to someone is offensive. But why should it? Never mind that such talk is not offensive to fellow bigots. Insofar as it is offensive, i.e. to the rest of us, this is not because offensiveness is somehow built into the meaning of the slur. What is offensive is the use of the slur, as well as whatever bigoted attitudes, discriminatory practices, and unseemly history are associated with its use. These ought to offend, but not as a matter of semantics.¹⁹

There are two other aspects of the use of slurs that recently have been insightfully identified and articulated. Camp (2013) convincingly explains how the contemptuous attitude associated with a slur reflects a certain "complex cognitive perspective" on the

¹⁹ Accordingly, a loaded descriptivist can, even without accepting Bolinger's (2015) and Nunberg's (2016) semantic equivalence claim, not only accept but welcome their insightful observations about the pragmatics of slurs.

target group. But that doesn't show that this perspective is built into the meaning of the slur. Camp does not need to claim that "slurs *conventionally* signal a speaker's allegiance to a derogating perspective on the group identified by the slur's extension-determining core" (2013: 331; my emphasis). Rather, this is signaled by the speaker's decision to use the slur, given its loaded meaning. In a somewhat similar vein, Jeshion proposes that a use of a slur "does not simply ascribe a property to the target, here [with the word 'faggot'], that of being gay. It classifies the target in a way that aims to be identifying" (Jeshion 2013a: 318), as if the only thing about its target that matters is being a person of that ilk (one of "those people," as bigots sometimes say). This seems right, but it does not warrant the further claim that this is "a matter of the semantics of the slurring term," that the slur "semantically encodes that [this property] is the, or a, defining feature of the target's identity." It seems to me that if merely belonging to a certain group is enough to make one contemptible (or something of the sort), that's going to be definitive of the target's identity, at least from the bigot's perspective.

5. Objections and replies

Slurs are often said, especially by dictionaries, to be disparaging terms "for," or "used to refer to," people of a certain group. That, however, doesn't mean that the slur itself refers to those people. Recall the distinction drawn earlier between a term being applied to an individual and its being true of that individual. This distinction will come in handy for answering what I take to be the main objections to loaded descriptivism. That's because loaded descriptivism does not entail that a slur refers to, or is true of, the people its neutral counterpart refers to and is true of.²⁰

It might be objected, based on Richard's contention (2008: 24ff.) that slurs inherently "misrepresent" their targets, that loaded descriptivism fails to account for this. However, loaded descriptivism can and should remain neutral on this point. It does not entail that slurs are true of their targets or that they are not. In fact, it correctly allows that some slurs can be, and indeed are, true of their targets. For example, an asshole, in virtue of what makes him qualify as such, really is contemptible. Calling him an asshole may be rude or crude, but you don't misrepresent him by calling him that (unless you're using the

²⁰ Hybrid expressivism does entail this but, as observed earlier, its proponents can argue that even though a slur is true of its targets, using the slur is not how one should refer to them.

term in its strictly anatomical sense). What makes an asshole an asshole makes him contemptible. Nothing makes a Jew a kike, regardless of what anti-Semites may think. Whereas group slurs generally misrepresent their targets, many personal slurs often represent their targets accurately, however rudely.²¹

Another possible objection to loaded descriptivism is based on the observation, discussed earlier, that it is difficult to directly deny the loaded component of a statement containing a slur. A denial is taken to reject the categorization, not the aspersion. For example, if an ignorant anti-Semite claims that Mick Jagger is a kike and you reply, “No, he isn’t” (or “That’s not true”), you are understood to be denying that Jagger is Jewish, and you’d be right. But suppose you are told that Leonard Cohen is a kike. If you reply, “No, he isn’t” or “That’s not true,” you are understood to be denying that Cohen is Jewish, even if, knowing that he is Jewish, your intention is to deny that being Jewish makes him a kike. The speaker calling Leonard Cohen a kike is, by his very use of the word, *presupposing* that Jews are inherently contemptible. He is not *asserting* that Cohen is contemptible in virtue of being Jewish. Since in the speaker’s view one can’t be Jewish without being a kike, when he describes Cohen as a kike the only new information he’s adding about Cohen is that he is a Jew.

Finally, it might be objected that if loaded descriptivism were true, there would be no difference between uttering (13) and uttering (14):

(13) Leonard Cohen is a kike.

(14) Leonard Cohen is a Jew, hence contemptible.

Uttering (14) may be offensive enough, but uttering (13) is even more so. How can this be if, as loaded descriptivism claims, the two sentences are semantically equivalent (more or less)? This objection falsely assumes semantic equivalence entails pragmatic equivalence; the familiar phenomenon of Gricean manner implicatures shows otherwise. In the present case, a word like ‘kike’, with its associated history of pernicious attitudes

²¹ We can also distinguish, among group-related slurs, *inclusive* slurs from *selective* ones. Inclusive slurs, like ‘kike’ and ‘faggot’, are applied wholesale to members of a kind, whereas selective ones, like ‘Shylock’ and ‘pansy’, apply to only subclasses, typically to those who display a certain stereotypical characteristic of that kind. Also, inclusive slurring words are sometimes used selectively, especially when modified by words like ‘real’ and ‘typical’. In that case, they are applied only to those who (the speaker thinks) exemplify some central stereotypical characteristic.

and practices, is a recognized lexical means for conveying what a speaker would otherwise need extra verbiage to convey. Rather than spell out the derogatory content, the slur encodes it in a simple ready-made packet. The lexicalization of this content gives its verbal expression extra force. As I see it, this is the element of truth in the pragmatic view alluded to earlier (see notes 13 and 19). Extra-semantic factors can also explain why some slurs, even slurs for the same group (compare ‘kike’, ‘hebe’, and ‘hymie’), are more insulting and offensive than others, and why certain words can go from being a slur to not being one (‘queer’) or vice versa (‘Negro’).

6. Summing up

Loaded descriptivism is a semantic thesis about slurring words, not a pragmatic thesis about their uses, much less a general account of the psychological attitudes and social practices associated with them. In particular, an account of the meaning of such a term does not have to explain such things as why there is, or how there came to be, a term with that meaning, why people use it, or what social roles it plays. The semantics of slurs should comport with general facts and phenomena involving slurs, but what it needs to address is rather limited. Loaded descriptivism should be judged with that in mind.

Slurs are loaded words. With group slurs that’s because their meanings add the property of implied contemptibility to that of group membership. Considered in the abstract, this may seem like a weird thing to be found in the meaning of a word, but it well serves the purposes of racists and other bigots. However weird, this distinctive feature of slurs is characteristic of personal as well as group slurs. The difference with personal slurs is that, in some cases anyway, having the property expressed by the slur *does* warrant contempt (to decide for yourself which ones, check out the list of personal slurs in the Appendix). It may seem that in contrast to (some) personal slurs all group slurs are inherently defective terms, on the grounds that they can’t but misrepresent their targets. That may be so, but that’s a moral, not a semantic defect. Even though certain words impute contemptibility by virtue of being a member of a certain group, it is not a semantic question whether being a member of a certain group *is* worthy of contempt. Racists and other bigots may irrationally believe this about their targets, as their use of racial and other group slurs attests, but that’s not a semantic problem with the slurs themselves. Loaded descriptivism allows that some personal slurs don’t misrepresent at

all, as when applied to sleezeballs, deadbeats, and brown-nosers. Not only can those slurs be applied to their targets, they can be true of their targets. So we shouldn't hold a term's semantics hostage to its moral status. Loaded descriptivism doesn't.

You can accept loaded descriptivism about group slurs without endorsing the use or even the existence of such terms. You can even appreciate why group slurs are far from useless, at least given the irrational rationale that underlies their use. Their users apply these terms to people belonging to certain groups because they suppose that such people are thereby contemptible. That, of course, doesn't make these terms true of their targets. Still, for racists and other bigots, using such words comes in handy. For what it's worth, loaded descriptivism helps the rest of us understand why.

Appendix: A Sampler of Slurs

Group > ethnic & racial

beaner, camel jockey, chink, coon, cracker, dago, frog, gook, goy, greaser, gringo, half-breed, haole, heeb, honky, hymie, injun, jap, jigaboo, kike, kraut, limey, macaca, mick, nigger, nip, paleface, pickaninny, polack, russki, sand nigger, shiksa, spic, wetback, whitey, wop, yankee, yid

Group > religious

bible thumper, Jesus freak, holy roller, mackerel snapper, kike, raghead, clamhead, heathen, infidel

Group > political

commie, radical, leftie, right winger, reactionary, tea bagger, fascist, Nazi, tree hugger, peacenik, gun nut, one-percenter

Personal > appearance

blimp, hippo, lardass, string bean, bean pole, shrimp, midget, dwarf, four-eyes, gimp, hag, slob, pig

Personal > life style

boor, yahoo, riffraff, hick, rube, redneck, trailer trash, yokel, square, hippie, yuppie, twerp, dork, geek, nerd, dweeb, freak, weirdo, kook

Personal > intelligence/sanity, etc.

bozo, dope, doofus, nincompoop, airhead, meathead, nitwit, dolt, bimbo, sap, twit, retard, idiot, moron, cretin, dickhead, dumbass, dumbfuck, nut case, nut job, wacko, pervert, psycho, crackpot, maniac, egomaniac, dupe, patsy, pigeon, sucker, dabbler, diletante, egghead, philistine, bigot

Personal > character

lazy: couch potato, jerk off, flake, quitter, slacker, straggler, freeloader, bum, putz

obsequious, gutless, etc.: ass-kisser, brown-noser, toady, chicken, mouse, weenie, wimp, wuss, nebbish, pussy, patsy, toady, lame ass, tight-ass, party pooper, stick in the mud, fuddy-duddy, old foggy

annoying: pain in the ass, kvetch, nag, brat, pest, snot, smart-ass, loudmouth, windbag, blowhard

worse than annoying: fart, dick, prick, cunt, louse, rat, snake, weasel, pig, swine, vermin, scum, bastard, jerk, asshole, shit, turd, douchebag, schmuck, bitch, bastard, dirtbag, scumbag, scuzzball, sleezeball, slimeball, stool pigeon, snitch, rat, fink, rat fink, punk, thug, barbarian, savage

Personal > sexual

lecher, rake, lothario, floozy, tart, tramp, slut, pansy, fairy, fag, queen, queer, lesbo, dyke

Personal > substance abuse

boozer, lush, wino, pot head, acid freak, crack head, dope fiend, junkie

Personal > financial

sponge, leech, deadbeat, tightwad, skinflint, shylock, money-grubber, gold digger, spendthrift

Professional

pig, fuzz, narc, quack, shrink, shyster, bankster, hack, pencil pusher, paper shuffler, bean counter, suit, empty suit, flunkey, peon, scrub, drudge, scab, loan shark, hustler, hooker, whore, ho, gigolo, pimp, crook, hood, goon, thug, hatchet man, charlatan, con artist, grifter, huckster, demagogue

Related Terms

Expressive Intensifiers: blessed, blasted, darn, damn, goddam, effin', freakin', (mother-)fuckin',

Exclamations: Shit! Dammit! Fuck! Goddam it! Oh crap! Holy shit!

Laudatives: angel, saint, hero, pro, ace, whiz, phenom, babe, hottie, knockout, hunk, stud

NOTE: Many of the above terms have multiple uses and could be put into more than one category. Also, some of these terms have become more derogatory or less derogatory over time.

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