
ROBIN JESHION

University of Southern California

jeshion@dornsife.usc.edu

SLUR CREATION, BIGOTRY FORMATION: THE POWER OF EXPRESSIVISM¹

abstract

Theories of slurs aim to explain how – via semantics, pragmatics, or other mechanisms – speakers who use slurs convey that targets are inferior persons. I present two novel problems. The Slur Creation Problem: How do terms come to be slurs? An expression ‘e’ is introduced into the language. What are the mechanisms by which ‘e’ comes to possess properties distinctive of slurs? The Bigotry Formation Problem: Speakers’ uses of slurs are a prime mechanism of bigotry formation, not solely bigotry perpetuation. With a use of a slur, how are speakers able to introduce new bigoted attitudes and actions toward targets? I argue that expressivism offers powerful resources to solve the problems.

keywords

slurs, epithets, pejoratives, semantics, racism

**1. Slur Creation,
Bigotry Formation**

Slurring terms are pejorative expressions that target individuals on the basis of race, ethnicity, religion, sexual orientation, nationality, socioeconomic status, occupation, and various other socially important properties. They are tools of subordination and their use a threat to human dignity. What do such expressions mean? And why are uses of them so extraordinarily offensive and so destructive to the groups and individuals they target?

My overarching perspective on slurs is guided by the idea that slurs function to dehumanize. When someone uses a slur, he *somehow* conveys that the targets have lesser standing as human beings. They are inferior, undeserving of the full respect we accord to persons *qua* persons. To dehumanize, slurs need not convey that targets are subhuman, creatures wholly undeserving of all respect. They need 'only' convey that targets are beneath the rest, possessing lower status along the moral domain, broadly construed.

In this paper, I will assume, not argue for, this guiding idea. Most theorists make the same assumption, at least implicitly². Indeed, one of the fundamental common problems and thus goals of philosophical theorizing on slurs is to explain *how* – via semantics, pragmatics, or some other mechanisms – speakers who use slurring terms convey that targets are inferior persons *qua* persons. Let's call this the *Dehumanization Problem*.

One of my primary aims is to present two new problems confronting theories of slurring terms. Both are importantly connected to, yet distinct from, the *Dehumanization Problem*.

Another is to argue that expressivist theories of slurring terms possess excellent resources to solve these two new problems. While I do not maintain that other theories cannot solve the two problems, I illustrate why several are limited in their ability to do so.

The first problem is the *Slur Creation Problem*: How do terms come to be slurring terms? An expression is introduced into the language. How exactly does it come to possess the properties distinctive of slurs? At time *t*, expression 'e' is introduced into the language. At some later time *t'*, 'e' is a slur, possessing the semantic, pragmatic, or social properties (the theory) deemed

1 I presented material from this paper at the San Raffaele Spring School *Emotions, Normativity, Social Life Workshop* in June 2016 and at the Dubrovnik Workshop on Philosophy of Language in September 2016. My thanks to both audiences for their interesting, challenging questions.

2 The agreement is typically not stated in the terms I employ, as slurs functioning to *dehumanize*, but rather as functioning to derogate others or convey targets as unworthy of full respect. Cf., Hom (2008) on derogatory force: epithets forcefully convey hatred and contempt of their targets. Even if there are substantive differences reflected in the formulation, they will be irrelevant for the purposes of this paper.

definitive of slurs. How did that happen? What are the mechanisms by which it attained the properties of slurs?

This problem is in many respects akin to another concerning meaning change, the problem of appropriation. At some time *t*, expression ‘*e*’ is a slurring term, possessing the semantic, pragmatic, or social properties (the theory) deemed definitive of slurs. At some later time *t*’, ‘*e*’ either lacks the properties definitive of slurs or has come to be ambiguous, with one of its new meanings lacking the properties. Just as theories of slurs ought to be capable of shedding light on how slurring terms’ derogation and, more broadly, their offensiveness can come to be *neutralized* through social processes of appropriation, so too should they explain the means by which a term comes to secure its particular slur-characterizing properties in the first place. The second problem is the *Bigotry Formation Problem*: Speakers’ uses of slurring terms are a prime mechanism of bigotry formation, not solely bigotry perpetuation. In using a slurring term ‘*e*’, a speaker is capable of contributing to the formation, including the initiation, of the hierarchical group structures (in-groups and out-groups) that partly constitute social institutions of bigotry. Following Hom, let’s characterize institutions of bigotry as composed of bigoted ideologies and bigoted practices toward members of the group. Bigoted ideologies are sets of bigoted beliefs and others attitudes toward and about a particular group. Bigoted practices are systematic ways of acting toward members of the group that are rooted on and rationalized by reference to the bigoted ideology. These include but are hardly limited to intentional systematic exclusion from positions of power, being accorded unequal treatment or less protection by law, all varieties of violence toward group members for being group members, from schoolyard bullying and humiliation to genocide. The problem of bigotry formation, then, is that with a use of a slur, a speaker is capable of introducing new bigoted beliefs, attitudes, and actions toward members of the target group and our account of slurring terms must be capable of explaining this fact³.

My favored analysis of the semantics of slurring terms is a specific version of hybrid expressivism⁴. Here I provide a bare-bones sketch of the view. It pertains specifically to literal uses of slurring terms. Slurring terms function semantically in roughly the same way that their neutral counterparts function when accompanied by contemptuous intonation ([1b], [2b]) or fronted by certain expletives or contempt-expressing adjectives ([1c], [2c]).

2. Expressivism

[1a] Jake is a Kike.
[1b] Jake is a *Jew*^c.
[1c] Jake is a dirty Jew.

[2a] Is that bar full of faggots?
[2b] Is that bar full of *homosexuals*^c?
[2c] Is that bar full of goddamn homosexuals?

There are three separable components to slurs’ semantics, what I call the *group-designating*, *expressivist*, and *identifying* components.

The group-designating component: slurring terms designate a particular group, the very

³ My reflection on the problems of slur-creation and bigotry-formation was inspired in many ways by Tirrell’s excellent (2012).

⁴ Details are in Jeshion (2013, 2016a). Others who adopt versions of hybrid expressivist semantics include Copp (2001), Potts (2005), Saka (2007), Richard (2008).

group that their neutral counterpart designates, if in fact the slur possesses a neutral counterpart. (Some don't, as we'll see momentarily.) It is the only component that contributes to determining the truth-conditional content of truth-conditionally evaluable utterances containing slurs. Just as [1b] is true just in case Jake is Jewish, so too is [1a] true in just such a circumstance⁵. Because it encodes exactly what its neutral counterpart does, the group-designating component contributes nothing to solving the Dehumanization Problem. The expressivist component: slurring terms are vehicles for expressing – not stating or declaring – speaker's attitudes. With a use of a slur, a speaker expresses his attitude of contempt for members of a socially relevant group G on account of their belonging to G or having a group-defining property *g*. Along this dimension, slurs are analogous to other expressions that are, as a matter of convention, used to express speakers' affective attitudes. "Hooray!" is used to express a speaker's happiness, often at triumph; "holy crap!" is used to express a speaker's astonishment or fear. Neither one encodes semantic descriptive contents like "I am happy!" or "I am astonished!". Likewise, utterances of [1a], [2a] do not encode the semantic descriptive content encoded in [1d], [2d], respectively.

[1d] Jake is Jewish and is therefore worthy of contempt

[2d] Is that bar full of homosexuals who are contemptible on account of being homosexual?

Instead, the speaker simply *expresses* the affectively laden evaluative attitude toward those designated by the slur's neutral counterpart, just as he does when sincerely expressing his attitudes by inflecting "Jewish", "homosexual" with a tone of contempt, as in [1b], [2b]. Understanding the expressivist component requires understanding the moral-psychological structure of contempt. Contempt is an affective attitude that can be manifest by a whole range of emotions (aversion, hatred, disgust, condescension, pity) and dispositions (to scorn, mock, humiliate, turn away, withdraw, and disregard). As such, it is an emotion, yet one that need not be accompanied by any particular behavioral manifestations or discrete feelings. It is also an evaluative attitude. Contemptuous regard involves ranking another person as low in worth along the moral domain on a certain basis. Consequently, in uttering [1a], by the expressivist component of the semantics, the speaker expresses his affective attitude that Jake and Jews more broadly rank low in worth *qua* persons on the basis of being Jewish.

The identifying component: in using a slur, a speaker classifies and represents the target in a way that aims to be identifying, that aims to specify *what the target is*. In [1a], just as in [1b] and [1c], the speaker conveys that being Jewish is a fundamental negative characteristic-defining feature of the targets, here Jake and Jews more broadly. This identifying reductive classification is an aspect that follows from the expressivist component because of the role of the basis within the moral-psychological structure of contemptuous regard. Because contempt (unlike hate, say) has a basis, contemptuous regard for another involves taking the properties of that basis as fundamental to the target's identity as a person⁶.

⁵ This claim is obviously highly controversial. I attempt to defend it in Jeshion (2016b).

⁶ Although the identifying component follows from the expressivist component (as a matter of the psychology of contempt), I dignify it as a separate component of the semantic of slurs because it is separately *deniable*. In response to [1a], Jake could, for instance, agree that being Jewish is fundamental to his identity while denying the contemptuous regard. I defend the first point about the psychological structure of contempt in Jeshion (2016a).

Expressivism provides a straightforward answer to the Dehumanization Problem. Speakers who use slurring terms convey that targets are inferior persons *qua* persons by virtue of the semantics: in sincerely using a slur with full understanding, speakers *express* their contempt for the targets, an affective attitude that the target ranks low in worth as a person. Furthermore, because the expression of contempt is semantically encoded, slurs possess a specific communicative function: to dehumanize in the sense of performing an action of *treating* targets as persons unworthy of full respect. Second-person uses, *callings* ('You kike!', 'Faggot!'), constitute direct acts whose function it is as expressions of contempt to induce shame in targets, compel a self-representation or self-assessment as someone lesser, unworthy, undeserving of respect. Third-person uses constitute acts whose function it is to lower the target's worth in the eyes of others, and consequently to define their social standing as lesser⁷.

Expressivism can also offer a plausible solution to the Slur Creation Problem. In my view, there may be multiple distinctive mechanisms that contribute to slur creation. Understanding how terms come to be slurring terms demands a full investigation of them, one resting on both conceptual analysis and quasi-empirical research into the dynamics of meaning-formation of various particular slurs. Here I spotlight what I regard as the most basic and plausible mechanism by which terms come to be slurs. I call it *Contempt Crystallization*.

Suppose that at time *t*, an expression 'e' is newly introduced into the language and is used to designate members of a certain group *G*. To mock, humiliate, or otherwise put down or signal disrespect toward members of *G*, speakers who use 'e' accompany its utterance with canonical behavioral manifestations of contempt. Cognitive psychologists have identified two primary behaviors cross-culturally expressed and discernable as contempt. One is contemptuous intonation. The other is the so-called 'unilateral lip curl', the facial expression in which one corner of the lips is retracted and raised, and eyes are slightly narrowed. Both are easily detectable and identifiable as expressions of contempt⁸. Because the manifestation of such intense affect often engenders transmission of feeling and mimicking reactions in non-targeted interlocutors disposed to similar social stances, others will come to use 'e' in the same fashion, manifesting contempt themselves. Over time, the contemptuous regard that is behaviorally manifest comes to 'rub off' on 'e' so that it eventually becomes crystalized in 'e': at some *t'*, 'e' conventionally encodes the speaker's contemptuous regard even in the absence of obvious behavioral manifestations. If the community continues to use 'e' for and only for the same group *G* that the initial users aimed to designate with 'e', the term comes to be a slur for *G*. According to expressivism, this systematic use by speakers to designate and indicate

3. The Power of Expressivism

7 Dehumanization often occurs, in addition, through specific features of the context of utterance. For instance, with a use of "faggot" in a particular context, a derogating group-stereotype may be activated, thereby contributing a subsidiary *pragmatically-induced* means by which gays are dehumanized. I discuss many distinct pragmatic sources of offensiveness in Jeshion (2013). Quite generally, on my view, to explain all the phenomena slurs exhibit, the expressivist semantics requires supplementation from a rich pragmatics. The semantic theory is necessary to account for what is constant across literal weapon uses of different slurs, and to explain how they differ from neutral counterparts.

8 Researchers have established that like many other basic emotions, contempt is manifest in specific *acoustic patterns*, its affective prosodic profile. These are construed as a function of the level, range, and contour of its fundamental frequency, its amplitude, intensity range, speech rate and various other temporal phenomena. To test the capacity to discern the acoustic pattern of contempt as contempt, researcher employ trained actors to utter neutral or nonsense sentences in the acoustic pattern of the emotion. Listeners are able to distinguish it as contempt with accuracy well beyond the statistically significant, comparable to that of many other negative emotions. Cf., Banse and Scherer (1996). For research supporting the unilateral lip curl as a universal expression of contempt, cf., Ekman and Heider (1988) and Matsumoto and Ekman (2004).

contempt toward the group is sufficient for 'e' to become a slur⁹.

As a basic template for slur-introduction, *contempt crystallization* contains several notable features. First, unsurprisingly, it is akin to the introduction into the language of other expressives. According to Merriam-Webster's Dictionary, the first known use of "woohoo!" was in 1981. Imagine its initial uses. We can plausibly suppose that the term was first accompanied by the speaker's prosodic or facial expressions of excitement or delight. The speaker of the utterance employed a compelling sound, one useful for efficiently connoting excited pleasure. People liked it. Imitation proliferates. Communal correlation of term with speaker's affect ensues. Eventually, the affect becomes crystalized with the term, allowing "woohoo!" to encode speaker's excitement *sans* demonstration of affect. Conventionalization. This illustrates the obvious: new expressive meanings are grounded in the expression of attitudes. Contempt crystallization is just a special case of *affect crystallization*.

Second, contempt crystallization does *not* depend upon the existence of a simple neutral counterpart expression with which the slurring word *contrasts* with respect to its register or with respect to being marked. The feature is attractive because many slurring terms in fact fail to possess neutral counterparts. Consider "hillbilly", "redneck", "white trash", "dago", "wog", and "gook". The first two are slurs used primarily by northern Americans and wealthy southerners to refer to uneducated, poor rural people living primarily in the Ozarks and Appalachia. "Dago" is used to refer wholesale to Italians, Portuguese, and Spaniards, "wog" by British and Australians to refer to anyone of Middle Eastern, south Asian, eastern European, and Mediterranean descent. "Gook", though primarily used today to refer exclusively to Koreans and Vietnamese, since the turn of the twentieth century, the expressions was the slur of choice in the US military applied indiscriminately to natives in US occupied counties (Nicaraguans, Costa Ricans, Filipinos, Korean, Cambodians, Vietnamese) and all enemy soldiers.

Third, contempt crystallization does not depend upon the existence of disparate opinions in the community about the worth of the slur's targets. Everyone could accept their standing as lesser, even the targets themselves could assume a false-consciousness. Our analysis of slur introduction thereby allows for the existence of slurs within insulated like-minded communities¹⁰.

Fourth, contempt crystallization not only explains how terms come to be slurs but also the *rapidity* and *ease* with which they can do so. To use the contemporary jargon of cognitive psychologists, terms can rapidly morph to slurs by means of emotional contagion.

Fifth, in contempt crystallization, the mechanism by means of which the term secures its referent need not line up exactly with the mechanism through which it comes to encode contempt. This affords our analysis considerable flexibility to explain various mechanisms of meaning acquisition. Consider 'kike'. Its earliest documented use is 1900. Two accounts of its origins predominate. On one, due to Leo Rosten, the word was coined on Ellis Island. Illiterate Jewish immigrants needing to sign entrance documents would use a circle 'O', refusing to sign with the customary 'X' that they associated with the Christian cross. As the Yiddish word meaning "circle" is "kikel", immigration inspectors used the term to shepherd people through the documentation process, and eventually began calling anyone who signed with an 'O' a kike. Here, I hypothesize that the expression "kike" was initially accompanied with manifestations of contempt by the non-Jewish inspectors, employed to refer to Jews more broadly and its

9 In maintaining that this account of contempt-crystallization is sufficient for slur-creation, I am not denying that numerous other social factors are typically present and can contribute to slur-creation.

10 Hom and May (2016) make the important point that slurs can exist in such communities.

intended referent stuck. On an alternative account, assimilated German Jews introduced the term as a derogative expression exclusively for eastern European and Russian Jews. Since their names often ended with the sound 'ki' ("Piatigorsky", "Brotsky"), "kike" accompanied by contemptuous intonation initially served as a put down for a subgroup of Jews. Over time, the term was picked up by non-Jews, applied wholesale to the group as an expression of anti-Semitism. Both account are plausible. (I take no stand on the actual historical development of 'kike'. Both are plausible *patterns* for slur-formation.) And both are explicable on an expressivist semantics that sharply separates the group-designating component from the expressivist and identifying components.

Finally, our analysis is *organic* because the primary mechanism of slur creation – the behavioral exhibition of contempt – is precisely what explains why slurs dehumanize. That is, the main resource in our solution to the problem of slur creation itself provides a natural analysis of slurs as tools of dehumanization.

What of the bigotry formation problem? What resources does expressivism possess to demonstrate how slurs contribute not just to the perpetuation of bigotry but its inception as well? The fact that expressivism allows for an organic solution to the problem of slur creation itself demonstrates how slurs contribute to bigotry formation. At all stages in the process of contempt crystallization, speakers exhibit their contempt for targets, a key mechanism for the rapid transfer of contemptuous attitudes toward the group. A wide range of psychological research establishes that manifesting *attitudes* toward others produces visceral mirroring reactions and responses in interlocutors. It can thereby contribute to explaining how, in ripe opportune social circumstances, contempt *goes viral*¹¹.

Furthermore, the nature of contemptuous regard discloses how its expression in slurs contributes to the formation of hierarchies partly constitutive of institutions of bigotry. Because uses of slurs encode dehumanizing attitudes and execute acts that aims to shame and lower the social status of targets, users of slurs contribute to the formation of bigoted attitudes and the hierarchical social structure (in-groups out-groups) constituting our most basic moral categories, those deserving full respect, those that do not.

Can other theories solve the dual problems of slur creation and bigotry formation? I will not argue that they confront an insurmountable obstacle. I wish only to show that certain non-expressivist theories of slurs encounter a common difficulty. To put the point crudely, all of them analyze what slurs are and how they dehumanize by piggybacking off of pre-existing bigoted social institutions. Yet in appealing to bigoted social institutions to characterize slurs, all have significantly limited their resources for explaining how those very terms came to be slurs and how they contributed to constructing the bigoted institutions they are characterized in terms of.

Furthermore, all of them, and indeed other theories of slurs as well, ought to confront contempt crystallization. Its possibility and, I maintain, plausibility as an effective mechanism for slur creation puts pressure on non-expressivist theories. If contempt crystallization is recognized as a plausible mechanism for slur creation, why not then adopt a full-fledged expressivist semantics of slurs? After all, the main resources in the account of slur creation are the same as in an expressivist semantics. If contempt crystallization is deemed implausible, one ought to say why, especially in light of its construction from research on the emotions and standing as just a special case of affect crystallization.

The views I consider are Hom's (2008) descriptivist analysis of slurs as semantically

4. Slur Creation, Bigotry Formation: Alternative Theories of Slurs

¹¹ Cf., Hatfield, E., Cacioppo, J., Rapson R. (1993), (1994) for early work on emotional contagion.

encoding group stereotypes enshrined in bigoted institutions; Anderson and Lepore's (2013) minimalist semantics coupled with an analysis of slurs' offensiveness construed entirely in terms of prohibitions on slurs' use; Nunberg's (2016) minimalist semantics coupled with his pragmatic affiliationism that construes slurs as marked terms signaling bigoted ideologies and institutions via generalized conversational implicatures¹². Although there are significant strengths and problems with each view, I focus here almost exclusively on the common concern regarding their ability to explain slur creation and bigotry formation.

On Hom's view, slurs piggyback on existing social institutions via their semantics. They encode a semantic descriptive content referencing properties about the group contained in the bigoted social ideology together with a discriminatory set of practices regarding how the group ought to be treated, where the ideology purports to justify the practices. For instance, "Chink" according to Hom "expresses a complex socially constructed property like: ought to be subject to higher college admissions standards and ought to be subject to exclusion from advancement to managerial positions, and...because of being slanty-eyed, and devious, and good at laundering, and...all because of being Chinese." Hom (2008) 431. The trouble regarding bigotry formation is straightforward: how could utterances of "Chink" contribute to forming, and especially *initiating*, racist ideologies and practices toward Chinese persons if its meaning encodes them? True, utterances could *perpetuate* the already enshrined racism encoded in the word. But it is doubtful that *via its semantics* "Chink" could shape the racists ideology¹³.

The problem of slur creation is that there appears to be no natural process by which a term is introduced into the language and comes to have the semantic descriptive content Hom offers for "Chink". Because Hom treats slur-content as individuated externalistically, he might align slur creation with natural kind term introduction. "Water" has its reference fixed externally, to designate *that* kind of stuff. So too for slurs. But by itself, this lacks plausibility because both "Chink" and "Chinese" will be introduced in the same fashion, to refer to *those* folks, and there is no reason why the slur and only the slur will come to possess the pejorative stereotype-containing externalist content. To make a case for how "Chink" evolved to become a slur, we need to understand why it, but not its neutral counterpart, ends up incorporating a content that implicitly references racist ideologies.

On minimalist semantics to which Anderson and Lepore and Nunberg subscribe, slurs are synonymous with their neutral counterparts. Anderson and Lepore advocate *prohibitionism*, a version of minimalism according to which slurs possess no special *linguistic properties* at all. Slurs are both semantically and pragmatically on a par with their neutral counterparts. What distinguishes the two is not to be explained by semantic descriptive content, nor by conventional implicature, nor by a particularized or generalized conversational implicatures. Everything about slurs' distinctive patterns of offensiveness is instead explained by the *extra-linguistic* fact

12 For lack of space, I bypass considering Bolinger's and Camp's accounts. If Bolinger is read as adopting semantic minimalism (she leaves this somewhat unclear), then what I say about Nunberg's view applies to hers. I suspect that because Camp analyzes slurs in terms of pre-existing perspectives, her accounts confronts the same problems as the others. Cf., Camp (2013), Bolinger (2015).

The views of Hom, Anderson and Lepore, and Nunberg are all striking insofar as they aim to explain all the phenomena slurs exhibit by appealing to a *single feature*, a descriptivist semantics, prohibitions on slurs' use, and affiliations with social ideologies of the slurs' provenance, respectively. My view by contrast recognizes multiple distinct varieties of sources to account for the phenomena. Some is explained by the semantics, some by pragmatics, some simply by reference to what speakers know about their social environments. Saka's discussions of slurs also draw upon multiple resources. Cf., Jeshion (2013b, 2016), Saka (2007).

13 Of course, one could supplement the ideology by saying things like "Chinks are so weird" but one could do the same with the neutral counterpart. The central intuition is that whatever is distinctive of slurs *itself* contributes to the bigotry formation. For Hom, it must be through slur's semantics.

that “their uses are prohibited, and so, they offend those for whom these prohibitions matter” (Anderson and Lepore 2013: 18). Here, the status of being a prohibited word is purely social: “slurs are prohibited words not on account of any content they communicate, but rather because of relevant edicts surrounding their prohibition” (Anderson and Lepore 2013: 18).

One of the most serious concerns for this view is its inability to account for how slurs derogate. The harm engendered by breaking taboos is radically different in kind from the harm engendered by spewing slurs. This concern is deepened when prohibitionism confronts the bigotry formation problem. Social prohibitions on their use, said to pinpoint what is offensive in slurs, simply cannot themselves explain anything about how slurs contribute to bigotry formation. Breaking prohibitions may cause offense by disrespecting those who enact and promote the prohibitions, but such disrespect is radically different from the societal bigotry formed by uses of slurs. Slur creation poses an equal challenge. For Anderson and Lepore, the initiation of a prohibition is what changes an ordinary term that references a group into a slur. Yet this analysis of slur origins is suspect: “Nigger” and “Chink” and “kike” were slurring terms far longer than blacks and Chinese and Jews had sufficient power in society to “banish” their use. Slurs come to be prohibited precisely *because they had been* functioning to dehumanize. Nunberg’s version of minimalism, what he calls *affiliationsim*, explains slurs’ power to derogate and offend by systematic pragmatic processes that result in a ‘routinized’ conversational implicature. These ventriloquistic implicatures, as Nunberg calls them, can be executed when a speaker confronts a choice in referential expression. She possesses two synonymous terms, yet one, the slur, is marked and associated with the bigoted attitudes of those who regularly use it and its provenance; the other, the slur’s neutral counterpart, is unmarked, the preferred term in ‘polite’ society. A speaker who uses a slur flouts the manner maxim by pointedly choosing the marked expression, which results in the speaker affiliating herself with the attitudes of the bigoted group that uses it¹⁴.

Does affiliationism possess the resources to explain how slurs contribute to bigotry formation, including its initiation? The primary worry is that while speakers are able to generate the effects of slurs by affiliating themselves with pre-existing bigoted ideologies and groups that employ the term, their capacity to do so is executed by piggybacking on the views of others: that’s what *affiliation* is. Consequently, the view seems hard-pressed to explain how, with uses of slurs, speakers are able to form and initiate the bigoted ideologies and groups that define hierarchical social structures. The affiliationist framework also depends crucially upon the presence of a neutral counterpart for every slur and differences of opinion about the merits of the group, ruling out scenarios on which even targets regard themselves as inferior. In §3 I suggested reasons to doubt both¹⁵.

Can affiliationism explain how terms come to be slurs without appealing to a mechanism like contempt crystallization? Nunberg would likely claim that expressions come to be slurs simply because they are terms of choice by racists and other bigots. That is, he’d offer his buck-stopper motto: “Racists don’t use slurs because they’re derogative; slurs are derogative because they’re the words that racists use.” A fuller assessment of this fundamental feature of Nunberg’s account must be reserved for another occasion.

14 Affiliationism merits extensive discussion I lack the space to address here. I offer a fuller discussion of this sophisticated theory in Jeshion (2016c).

15 Affiliationism also depends crucially on the social dominance of politeness, so that the slur is, in every context, the marked expression. I challenge it in Jeshion (2016c).

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