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SLURS: SEMANTIC CONTENT, EXPRESSIVE CONTENT AND SOCIAL GENERICIS

abstract

Slurs are offensive expressions targeting individuals on the basis of their membership to certain social groups. Some authors have argued that the offensiveness of slurs is related to the semantic encoding of stereotypes in their meaning. As noticed by Robin Jeshion (2011, 2013a, 2013b), the stereotypical strategies do not seem to provide a satisfactory analysis of slurs' functional traits. Herein, I propose to modify her view by making a distinction between two offensive dimensions of slurs: a negative expressive component encoded in the semantic content and directed toward a certain group of individuals, and the social generics related to that group conveyed as conversational implicatures.

keywords

slurs, social generics, stereotypes, Jeshion, expressive content

1. Introduction Slurs are offensive expressions usually understood to communicate contempt and hatred toward individuals and groups of individuals on the basis of their presumed racial membership ('nigger'), geographical origin ('redneck'), sexual orientation ('faggot') or other features¹. In recent years, these expressions have become an issue of increasing interest in philosophy of language, since they possess particular linguistic properties². Different authors (Camp 2011; Croom 2011; Dummett 1973; Hom 2008; Tirrell 1999) have argued that the offensiveness of slurs is related to the semantic encoding of stereotypes in their meaning. I will interpret here such encoded stereotypes as *social generics*. This interpretation is motivated by the power of generics to promote *social essentialism* (Rhodes *et al.* 2012) and to characterize their targets in a way which is hard to challenge (Leslie 2007, 2008, 2012, forthcoming; Langton *et al.* 2012; Haslanger 2014). Associating stereotypes to the semantic content of slurs presents some explanatory advantages; nevertheless, the stereotypical strategies do not seem to provide a satisfactory analysis of all the functional traits of slurs.

The difficulties of the stereotypical semantic strategies can be avoided: my proposal is to characterize the semantic content of slurs as analytically decomposable in a *negative attitudinal non-truth-conditional component* directed toward a group of individuals referred to by a descriptive non-stereotypical component. Recently, Robin Jeshion (2011, 2013a, 2013b) has proposed an analysis that takes this direction. Her strategy regards slurs' content as decomposable into several semantic components, treating the activation of stereotypes as a possible contextual association with the use of these expressions – i.e., as *perlocutionary effects* on bystanders. I would suggest modifying Jeshion's theory by distinguishing between two offensive dimensions of slurs: 1) a negative expressive component encoded in the semantic content and directed toward a certain group of individuals, and 2) the association of social generics related to that group as *conversational implicatures*.

1 Some other derogatory expressions like this type will appear in my work, but I need to point out that these terms will be *mentioned* (just for didactic purposes), and not *used* in the course of the discussion.

2 Among the most important features, slurs possess a neutral counterpart (e.g., 'Chink' and 'Chinese'), and the 'derogatory autonomy', i.e. the capacity to derogate independently from the intention of any of its particular speakers. Furthermore, their offensiveness varies over time, and the targets of a slur can use the same term in an appropriate and non-offensive way to signal solidarity between members of the same community (Hom 2008: 426, 428). Other properties, relevant to this topic, will be discussed in the following sections.

In order to explain slurs' offensiveness and functional traits, some authors have proposed several treatment strategies according to which the meaning of slurs is related to the semantic encoding of stereotypes, while considering the codification of stereotypes as an inferential association (Dummett 1973; Tirrell 1999), or as a complex descriptive condition (Hom 2008), or as part of a two-dimensional semantics (Camp 2011; Croom 2011). The intuition of what Robin Jeshion calls a "*stereotype semantics of slurs*" is justified at least by five considerations (Jeshion 2013a: 314-315):

- (i). The use of slurs is widely spread in communication, as well as the stereotypes related to the groups themselves. Utterances containing slurs easily activate stereotypes in the minds of bystanders, who are likely to infer that the speaker endorses the same existing social stereotypes.
- (ii). Slurs and stereotypes seem to present some common features: unlike pejoratives in general (e.g., 'idiot'), they both refer to social categories beyond the individuals to whom they are directed, and often in a derogatory way.
- (iii). An appeal to the semantic encoding of stereotypes can explain why slurs are surrounded by a stronger taboo status in society than other pejoratives.
- (iv). Assuming that slurring terms semantically encode stereotypes permits to account for slurs' 'derogatory variation'³: the offensiveness of different slurs will vary depending on the different offensiveness of the stereotypes encoded.
- (v). If slurs semantically encode stereotypes, then it is possible to explain the use of slurring terms whose extension can be restricted only to some in-group members, or expanded to include even out-group members, since it would be sufficient for the individuals targeted to be conforming to the stereotypes a slur ascribes.

These analyses can be reinterpreted in a more explanatory way, considering as part of the semantic content of slurs a particular subset of stereotypes, sharing the syntactic form of the linguistic category of generics.

Generics, which are generalizations that omit quantifiers (like 'some', 'most' or 'all'), behave in a different way, compared to ordinary quantified statements, as they express claims about the "essence" of a particular category (instead of its particular members). The mere absence of the ascribed property does not undermine the content of the generics; therefore, social generics characterize entire target groups in a way which is difficult to challenge (Leslie 2007, 2008, 2012, forthcoming; Langton *et al.* 2012; Haslanger 2014).

Consider the following statements:

- (1) All Italians are mobsters
 - (2) All Muslims are terrorists
- and
- (3) Italians are mobsters
 - (4) Muslims are terrorists.

In order to express a generalization about two different groups, a speaker can choose to utter either (1) or (2), focusing on the target groups' members – otherwise she could utter either (3)

3 As highlighted by Hom, "Some epithets are more insulting than others. While epithets like 'nigger' are extremely derogatory towards African-Americans, epithets like 'limey' are much less derogatory towards the English" (2008: 426).

or (4), focusing on the communities themselves. While a single counterexample is sufficient to render the generalization expressed by (1) and (2) false, (3) and (4) cannot be undermined even if the vast majority of the individuals who belong to the relevant target group lack the ascribed property. It does not matter, for example, if the majority of Muslims are not terrorists. With an utterance of (4), the speaker seems to link *being terrorists* with a supposed Muslims' "essence"; and, if we try to challenge the generic with different counterexamples, the proponent of (4) can always affirm that although many Muslims are not terrorists, it does not mean that property is not part of their essence; in fact they would exhibit that property if they were under certain circumstances (because they are "disposed" to possess that property). Recent experimental studies (e.g., Rhodes *et al.* 2012) show that hearing generic language about a social group seems to lead (especially children) to think in an essential and stereotyped way that particular social "categories" mark distinct kinds of people. As a result, social generics – promoting *social essentialism*⁴, i.e. the belief that the members of a social kind share stereotypical properties and dispositions due to their supposed "essence" – are difficult to "contrast" because they can characterize entire target groups while allowing for many exceptions. I believe that the distinctive features of social generics can be usefully linked to the offensiveness of slurs: in addition to being motivated by the five above-mentioned considerations (i)-(v), the intuition that slurs semantically encode stereotypes as social generics can account for two further points:

- (vi). If slurs semantically encode social generics, then it is possible to explain the capacity of these terms to characterize and derogate whole target groups in a way which is difficult to "contest".
- (vii). Since generics promote *social essentialism*, assuming that slurs semantically encode social generics, we may explain the capacity of slurs to bolster social oppression toward their target groups.

3. Stereotypes as perlocutionary effects

Although this proposal involves some advantages, stereotypical semantic strategies do not seem to provide a satisfactory analysis of all the functional traits of slurs. In particular, as Jeshion highlights (2011, 2013a, 2013b), a stereotype semantics of slurs must deal with several problems.

First: the knowledge of the stereotypes regarding a particular target group does not seem to be a necessary condition to understand a slur. In fact, a speaker may choose to employ a slur in order to express contempt toward one or more individuals on the basis of their membership to a relevant target group, while consistently disavow the approval of any stereotypical feature typically attributed to the same group (Jeshion 2013a: 320, 322). Second: stereotypes cannot be considered as the only source of offensiveness of these expressions, since there are stereotypical beliefs culturally perceived as neutral or positive (Jeshion 2013a: 323 and Jeshion 2013b: 245-246). Third: slurs and particular occurrences of their relative neutral counterparts seem to present the same semantic properties.

Consider the following statements:

- (5) John is a nigger
- (6) John is *black*^c
- (7) John is a fucking black.

⁴ The term is due to Rhodes *et al.* (2012).

In (6) the “C” superscript indicates stress intonation of contempt (Jeshion 2013a: 321). It is undeniable that (6) and (7) express an offensive content toward an individual, John, on the basis of his group membership, as much as (5). However, it is not plausible to maintain that these occurrences of neutral counterparts involve the semantic encoding of stereotypes. If this observation is correct, and if the neutral counterparts marked negatively exhibit the same semantic properties of slurs, then this observation represents a serious concern for any stereotype semantics of slurs. If we hypothesize that stereotypes are semantically encoded in the literal meaning of slurs, then we should say the same for their neutral counterparts – and that seems highly implausible (Jeshion 2013b: 246).

These remarks seem to justify the hypothesis according to which slurring terms could be considered as expressions that linguistically signal the encoding of an expressive negative component directed toward the group denoted by a non-stereotypical descriptive component. Indeed, slurs seem to present an interesting combination of properties generally attributed both to the expressive and descriptive dimension of meaning⁵. On the other hand, the activation of stereotypes could be treated as a contextual association with the use of slurs. Jeshion (2011, 2013a, 2013b) has recently proposed a treatment strategy of slurs that takes this direction. According to her proposal, slurs present a tripartite semantic structure – which is decomposable into a *truth-conditional component*, a *negative attitudinal component*, and an *identifying component*.

The encoding of the truth-conditional component explains why a slurring term conventionally refers to the target group denoted by its neutral counterpart (Jeshion 2013b: 240).

The second component of the semantic content of slurs is attitudinal (non-truth-conditional): a slurring term, unlike its neutral counterpart, is conventionally used to express contempt for the members of a target group because of their membership to that group. Following the characterization of the expressive dimension proposed by Kaplan (1999)⁶, Jeshion gives this component the following *rule of use*:

for a group slurring term S with a neutral counterpart NC that references a group G, S is used to express contempt for members of G on account of their being in G or on account of their possessing a G-defining property g (Jeshion 2013b: 240-241).

The third component of the semantic content of slurs is the identifying one: according to Jeshion, the offensiveness of slurring terms is not limited to the expression of an attitude of contempt toward one or more individuals on the basis of their membership to a particular group. For example, when someone calls someone else ‘faggot’, the homophobic speaker identifies a property that believes is possessed by that group of people as a defining feature of theirs – possibly the only one. This component

⁵ *Expressives* are terms conventionally used by speakers in order to highlight their own emotional states. This category includes expressions such as pejoratives, pure expressives (e.g., ‘Oops’ or ‘Ouch’), and honorifics (e.g., ‘Madam’ or ‘Sir’). Contrary to *descriptives* (i.e., emotionally neutral terms used to ascribe features or properties such as ‘black’, ‘popular’, and ‘small’), expressives do not contribute to the truth-conditions of the utterances in which they occur. Expressives seem to play a key role in communication: they allow speakers to effectively achieve complex social results, and to express their emotional states and perspectives in a more functional way than descriptives (Jay 2009: 153).

⁶ Among the first to engage in a systematic analysis of expressives, Kaplan (1999) has claimed that the semantic treatment of an expressive requires the identification of its correct conventional use. According to his view, an expression is descriptively correct if what it describes is the case, while expressively correct if the emotional state or attitude displayed by the speaker is the case.

is used to dictate how others ought to treat, regard, think of, and respond to its target [...]. Notice that the identifying component is dependent upon the expressive component because [...] it follows from what it is to find someone contemptible on the basis of being gay that one takes that person's sexual orientation as the most or among the most central aspects of that person's identity. This dependence is, at heart, moral-psychological, but is manifest in the semantics. A speaker who expresses contempt toward her target for being *G* *thereby* also expresses and implicitly represents *G* as fundamental to her target's identity as a person (Jeshion 2013b: 242).

Jeshion (2013b: 242-243) maintains that the offensiveness of this component is closely associated to the offensiveness of the attitudinal component. Indeed, according to her view, what makes the use of a slur dehumanizing to its target group is the conjunction of these two components into a single utterance. However, the identifying component explains the particular offensiveness of slurs to target individuals who do not consider the identity of the target group as a defining feature of their person, or do not want someone else to define their social identity from the outside⁷.

According to Jeshion, there would be also pragmatic sources of the offensiveness of slurs – which do not depend on the conventional meaning or on the rules of use of these terms. In particular, according to her treatment strategy, the use of slurs can contextually activate the stereotypes related to relevant target groups – in Austin's terms – as *perlocutionary effects* on bystanders (Jeshion 2013b: 245-247). In other words, the utterance of a slur by the speaker can change the beliefs, emotions and actions of the hearers in a socially and psychologically predictable way (although this may happen unintentionally or even not at all), in particular activating stereotypes and, among other possible effects, compounding the social oppression toward the relevant target groups.

4. Social generics as conversational implicatures

The treatment strategy proposed by Jeshion presents several advantages: considering the content of slurs as decomposable into a truth-conditional neutral component and an offensive attitudinal component, this strategy helps to explain why the offensiveness of such expressions persists across negation, denial, conditional and other complex constructions – since the expressive component cannot be “harnessed” at the truth-conditional level. Moreover, treating stereotypes as possible contextual associations to the use of slurs – i.e. as *perlocutionary effects* on bystanders – Jeshion's analysis avoids the problems presented by stereotypical semantic strategies⁸. However, this proposal presents some difficulties too. First: in order to explain the functional traits of slurs, the semantic encoding of the identifying component does not seem necessary to me. If someone employs a slur, the attitudinal component will be directed toward the ascription to the target group, and since the speaker is already categorizing the membership to a group to be the – or one of the – defining characteristics of the identity of their target, this additional component is not necessary to characterize the semantic content of these expressions. In certain contexts, even the ascription of the neutral counterpart, and in general of any predicate – like ‘student’ –, may be offensive to those who do not consider this feature as their defining characteristic or do not want their identity to be defined by others. Moreover, since Jeshion maintains that slurs

⁷ Actually, as we shall see in the next section, this also seems to apply for terms that are not slurs, like neutral counterparts.

⁸ Jeshion's theory is far more complex than displayed here and it presents more actual advantages; nevertheless, what is shown is sufficient for my purposes.

and relative neutral counterparts marked negatively have the same semantic properties, it should be argued that the contempt intonation allows to semantically associate to neutral counterparts the identifying component, in addition to the expressive one – which does not seem particularly plausible. Furthermore, the addition of this component also seems problematic: maintaining that the semantic content of slurs prescribes how their target groups ought to be treated, this seems to commit Jeshion herself to support a stereotype semantics of slurs, as if these expressions included essentializing normative generics. Briefly, this component should also be considered as a possible contextual association with the use of slurs, instead of a semantic component of these expressions⁹.

Second: although the proposal to consider both the stereotype activation and the compounding of social oppression as pragmatic sources of the offensiveness of slurs is acceptable, treating these phenomena as possible perlocutionary effects associated to the use of slurs seems overly reductive. The limits of such a proposal are particularly clear when it is related to three points: that solution cannot explain 1) *why* the use of slurs (or neutral counterparts negatively marked) can increase social oppression toward their targets and 2) *why* the utterance of slurs (or neutral counterparts marked) in certain contexts activate some of the existing social stereotypes but not others, and 3) *how* such an activation can be understood by the speaker through the exploitation of the extra-semantic characteristics of a conversation.

I do believe that these difficulties can be avoided by modifying Jeshion's theory, distinguishing between two offensive dimensions of slurs: 1) the semantic encoding of a negative expressive component directed toward a group of individuals referred to by a descriptive component and 2) the association of the social generics related to the target group as Gricean *conversational implicatures* (Grice 1975).

This characterization is compatible with Jeshion's observation that slurs and neutral counterparts negatively marked seem to have the same semantic properties: in fact, the association of the contemptuous intonation to the neutral counterpart of a slur does not seem to require the encoding of an identifying component in addition to the descriptive one. If slurs and negatively marked neutral counterparts have the same semantic properties, then the encoding of the identifying component can be rejected – avoiding the problem of explaining the encoding of the prescriptive practices assumed by Jeshion. I would like to consider this modification both as non-problematic and advantageous: indeed, this variation allows solving, in a simple and effective way, one of the problems associated with Jeshion's proposal.

Moreover, this characterization permits to avoid another difficulty in Jeshion's analysis.

The characteristics of conversational implicatures seem particularly suited to explain how a speaker can use a slur to convey an additional stereotypical content.

First: conversational implicatures can be *canceled* (explicitly or contextually); this characteristic could explain why a speaker may use a slur to express contempt for one or more individuals on the basis of their mere membership to a target group without being aware of any particular stereotypical characteristic related to the same group, or deny the approval of these features without contradiction (while still expressing an offensive content toward the target group, due to the encoding of a negative expressive component). Conversational implicatures explain this possibility since they are not part of the semantic content of the

9 A clarification: Jeshion maintains that the identifying component, in fact, "should not be conflated with any notions of metaphysical identity or essentialism [...]. Rather, they [slurring terms] express that the target's group membership is the, or among the, most central characteristic(s) for classifying what the target is" (Jeshion 2013b: 242). However, my observation avoids this problem because, as highlighted by Leslie (2008, forthcoming), generic claims are purely psychological, not metaphysical: "human perception is the important factor here" (2008: 34).

utterances they are associated with.

Second: conversational implicatures are *not detachable*; using a different but propositionally equivalent statement – for example,

- (8) Vincent is a Wop
and
(9) Vincent is *Italian*^c

in the same communicative context generates the same implicature. This could explain why, for example, answering the question

- (10) Why do you think Vincent should not be hired?

with something like (8) or (9) would convey in the same context – and responding to the same question – the same stereotypes.

Third: the propositional content of a conversational implicature presents independent truth-conditions that do not contribute to the truth-conditional meaning of what is explicitly said; (8) and (9) can be true or false regardless to the truth-value of the conversationally implicated content. This could explain why a slur can be used against an individual the speaker does not consider as belonging to a specific target group, in order to ascribe her a stereotypical property that the speaker believes to be true.

Fourth: conversational implicatures can be *calculated* – i.e., it is possible to reconstruct a series of inferential steps that guided the hearers to derive the implicature and which may be expected by the speaker.

Finally, this characterization offers a possible explanation to the reason why the use of slurs (or of the negatively marked neutral counterparts) can bolster social oppression toward their targets. Indeed, considering the social stereotypes conveyed as social generics, it is possible to explain why the offensiveness communicated by slurs is so difficult to challenge. Summing up, we can say that, given that generics promote social essentialism, i.e. the belief that the members of a social kind share stereotypical properties and dispositions due to their supposed “essence”, this additional source of offensiveness can easily explain the capacity of slurs to increase social oppression toward their targets.

5. Concluding remarks

In this work, I have suggested considering the semantic content of slurs as decomposable into an offensive expressive component directed toward a target group, denoted by a descriptive component. This semantic structure seems to be confirmed, as noted by Jeshion, by neutral counterparts (which are truth-conditionally equivalent to the descriptive content of slurs) marked with an external expressive component, which present the same semantic properties of slurs. Moreover, I believe that slurs (and derogatory occurrences of the neutral counterparts) can be offensive in an additional way, linked to their context of utterance – i.e. their use may convey social generics related to the relevant target group as conversational implicatures. Since generic language promotes social essentialism, this additional source of offensiveness can explain the capacity of slurs to increase social oppression toward the target groups they are directed to.

This characterization helps avoid the main problems both in stereotypical semantic strategies and in the treatment strategy proposed by Jeshion. However, this proposal of mine needs the resolution of two problems, which would require further extensive discussion far beyond the goal of the present work. Slurs, and pejoratives in general, can be used ironically in a friendly (but non-appropriate) way among out-group individuals in order to increase their

social intimacy: in these contexts, the use of slurs is fundamentally based on the ascription of stereotypical features contextually salient. Therefore, the association of social generics is very significant in the context of utterance and does not seem to be cancelable by the speaker himself without contradiction. If this observation were correct, it would raise a possible objection against the possibility to consider the association of social generics as conversational implicatures. Finally, my proposal shares one limit also present in Jeshion's treatment strategy: as a matter of fact, both proposals are applied to slurs whose descriptive content only denotes the group referred to by their neutral counterparts and only to those occurring as nouns. This aspect does exclude the analysis of those expressions that appear to encode an additional descriptive content, such as "Beamer" or "Christ killer", or other slurs used with different grammatical functions. The slurring terms to which this proposal of mine might be applied are the "central" expressions of this lexical category, but an adequate theoretical analysis should consider these terms as widely as possible. The view outlined above requires a development toward this direction.

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