

Contested Slurs: Delimiting the Linguistic Community

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Abstract

Sometimes speakers within a linguistic community use a term that they do not conceptualize as a slur, but which other members of that community do. Sometimes these speakers are ignorant or naïve, but not always. This paper explores a puzzle raised when some speakers stubbornly maintain that a contested term *t* is not derogatory. Because the semantic content of a term depends on the language, to say that their use of *t* is semantically derogatory despite their claims and intentions, we must individuate languages in a way that counts them as speaking our language *L*, assigns *t* a determinately derogatory content in *L*, and still accommodates the other features of slurs' linguistic profile. Given the difficulty of doing this, there is some reason to give a non-semantic analysis of the derogatory aspect of slurs. Along the way, I suggest that rather than dismissing the stubborn as semantically incompetent, we would do better to appeal to expected uptake as moral reasons for the stubborn to adjust their linguistic practices.

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1 Disagreeing about slurs

Sometimes speakers sincerely disagree about whether a term is a slur. This is understandable, because being a slur is not as stable a status as being a noun. Some terms initially introduced as slurs, like 'queer', are eventually fully reclaimed; some merely fade from use and memory. Others are active slurs in some communities, but operate differently in the speaker's community, leaving their status somewhat unclear (plausibly 'gypsy'—a slur for the Roma in European Englishes—is such a term in American-English). And of course many slurs weren't born that way, but started life as unremarkable nouns. Though theorists disagree about the mechanics, there is broad consensus that there are two aspects to the meaning of slur terms: they (i) designate a group of people, and (ii) derogate them *qua* members of that group.¹ In derogating, they express something like contempt, intimating that the target is other, lesser, to be excluded from 'our' community and space of moral concern. When these attitudes are inapt—as they nearly always are, for paradigmatic slurs—the use of these terms is deeply offensive, and one does moral wrong in derogating this way.² We should generally avoid using these terms because as a moral fact, we should avoid derogating the target groups, and as a linguistic fact, the terms derogate those groups. Those who use slurs *because* they are derogatory accept the linguistic claim but reject the moral claim. The other set of speakers who carry on using the terms contest only the linguistic claim: they agree that we should not derogate the group, but they deny that the term is derogatory, especially as *they* use it. This second group—stubborn speakers—are the focus of this paper.

An example will help to illustrate and crystalize the challenge. Suppose an elderly neighbor volunteers hiring advice for your small business, saying "You've got to find yourself a Chinaman or a Jap. Orientals have an incredible work ethic!" You thank her for the suggestion, but ask her not to use those particular terms in the future; they have become derogatory. To your dismay, she replies "Oh, I know they're not politically correct anymore; people think they're 'offensive'. But that's just what they're called, and you know I don't mean anything rude by it. People

¹I am here using 'meaning' loosely, to include pragmatic and social import, not merely semantic content. So even minimalist pragmatic accounts of the derogatory aspect (like Nunberg (2018)) count as giving the meaning of a slur term, in this sense.

²Though see Jeshion (2013b), Bach (2018) for arguments that these attitudes can be apt, e.g. when associated with terms like 'pimp' and 'pederast'.

shouldn't get so upset; there's nothing actually bad about the words." Suppose your neighbor is sincere, and does not (even implicitly) have contempt for people of Asian descent.³ There are broadly two sorts of response strategies available: (1) insist that she is mistaken; as a matter of their semantic content, the terms are derogatory even as she uses them, or (2) say that she has compelling reasons to avoid the terms even if she's not linguistically mistaken. The former may seem both a more appropriate and more powerful reply, and so seem to support giving a semantic analysis of the derogatory aspect of slurs. I will suggest that this appearance is misleading; the linguistic profile of slurs makes it very difficult to ground the claim that stubborn speakers are simply mistaken, and in fact the second is the better response.

1.1 Starting platitudes

Derogatory terms—and in particular, slurs—have several characteristic features that make your neighbor's reply insufficient to establish that the terms *as she uses them* are non-derogatory. These are reflected in four near-platitudes commonly accepted as characteristic of the expressions we call 'slurring terms':

◇ DEROGATORY AUTONOMY – Whether a term is derogatory is largely independent of speaker intent. Sincerely not intending to derogate does not block the intimation of contempt, etc., involved in using a slur. Bracketing very special contexts, even if no one is actually offended by your use, and you personally don't feel any contempt or ill-will at all for the LGBTQ community, if you are not a member of that community and use 'faggot' to refer to someone who is, you have used a derogatory term.⁴

◇ UPTAKE INDEPENDENCE – Whether a term is derogatory is largely independent of uptake in the immediate context of utterance. The fact that the actual hearers happen not to be offended at the use of a slur doesn't make the term non-derogatory; conversely, someone's actually *taking* offense at a use of 'refrigerator' doesn't make it a derogatory term.

◇ SOCIAL-CONTEXT DEPENDENCE – To be a derogatory term in given language, the term must *operate* as one among the relevant community. The derogatory aspect of a slur is tied to its position in social practices: its history, stereotypes, rules of use, etc. This gives rise to the fourth feature,

◇ LOCALITY – As Hornsby (2001, p. 1) observes, "it is a local matter—local in time, and local to groups of speakers among whom there are common understandings—which words, if any, are derogatory." When an ordinary noun undergoes pejoration, it becomes derogatory for future speakers. The shift doesn't render past occurrences derogatory; ours is not the linguistic community determining the status of the term for past speakers. Similarly, after current slur terms are forgotten or reclaimed, they won't be derogatory for future speakers. If someone were to ask "well, is the term derogatory or isn't it?", we'd have to answer that there is no community-independent fact of the matter. In one linguistic community it is derogatory; in the other, it isn't.

Jointly, these features of derogatory terms create a particularly good puzzle about the relationship between the community and the individual in determining the meanings of terms in a language. Slurs are a linguistic phenomena for which there is pressure to vindicate some amount of prescriptivism: whether a term is derogatory is not settled by individual speakers or hearers; they are answerable to the term's meaning in the broader community. At the same time, which terms are derogatory shifts for speakers both over time and across regions of space. So it is important to give an answer to 'why do slurs mean what they do?' that gives the community a prominent role, but is flexible enough to acknowledge and explain how these meanings shift and change across different groups of speakers. Bearing all of this mind, what should we say about—or to—stubborn speakers like your neighbor?

³Though undoubtedly some speakers deny that a term is derogatory only strategically, such bad-faith disagreements will not concern us today.

⁴In-group uses are more complicated; due to space constraints I'll be setting them aside.

1.2 Understanding & disagreeing about slurs

Here are two things it seems right to say: first, that they *should* avoid using the contested term *t*, and second, that this is because using *t* derogates the group it identifies. A natural (but in my view inadvisable) way to ground this is by maintaining that the derogatory aspect is just part of *t*'s semantic content (the truth conditions, representational content, or character of *t*).⁵ Your neighbor cannot use *t* non-derogatorily for the same reason that I cannot use 'arthritis' to refer to an ache in my thigh: that's just not what the word *means*. This is precisely what many theorists, including Kaplan (2005, p. 7), do say:

"...expressions of these kinds [e.g. 'hello', 'oops'] have a conventional meaning, or, better, a conventional *use* [...] One who used these expressions in the opposite way would be making a linguistic error. Similarly, the word 'honkey' is a derogatory term for a Caucasian. Anyone who claims to be using it in a non-derogatory sense is also making a linguistic error."

There is also a simple intuitive argument sometimes given in favor of this approach: if you don't know that a slur is derogatory—if for instance you take 'spic' to merely be a cute way of abbreviating 'Hispanic'—then you don't understand what the word means, even though you know it is a term for Hispanics.⁶ Given your ignorance, you are not linguistically competent with the word, and (the argument runs) since ignorance of merely pragmatic phenomena does not threaten linguistic competence, the derogatory aspect must be semantic, part of the conventional meaning of the term in the language.

It is difficult to justify treating stubborn speakers as simply incompetent this way. In fact, I will argue that if we think that stubborn speakers' uses of contested terms are genuinely derogatory, this gives us some reason to avoid, rather than embrace, a semantic analysis of the derogatory aspect of slurs. To see why, we should say a bit more about the structure of stubborn disagreement. When speakers A and B sincerely disagree about whether *t* is derogatory, there are roughly three possibilities: either A is right (*t* is not derogatory in their language); or B is right (*t* is derogatory in their language); or A and B are speaking past each other, and while *t* is not derogatory in A's language, it is in B's language. I mention the first possibility only to note that it sometimes happens, and so we should not take the fact that some speakers insist that *t* is derogatory to be sufficient for its being so.

In cases of the second type (*ignorant slurring*), A is mistaken in taking *t* to be non-derogatory. The most obvious instances involve speakers who are still learning the language, and are simply unaware that the term is derogatory. These speakers also are disposed to defer linguistically to others in the community, and update their use when corrected. They are easily glossed as simply incompetent with respect to the term. But the naïve are not the only speakers who use derogatory terms ignorantly. Often there is a lag between when a term acquires a derogatory meaning and the adoption of a social taboo on its use. During that interval, slurs can wend their way deep into the language, occurring as compositional parts of names or complex idiomatic expressions that, because they are used in speech acts not aimed at derogating, remain in use even after the taboo takes effect.⁷ Fluent speakers who repudiate the attitudes evoked by

⁵Distinguishing between 'semantic' and non-semantic accounts is not straightforward. Few theorists hold that the derogatory aspect is part of the truth-conditional content of *t* (Croom, 2011; Hom, 2008; Hom & May, 2013, are exceptions), though some maintain that the derogatory aspect renders slurs non-truth-apt (Hedger, 2012; Richard, 2008). Many suggest an expressivist (Saka, 2007) or hybrid-expressivist (Jeshion, 2013a) semantics, or a dual-proposition or speech act analysis (Bach (2018) and Camp (2018), respectively.) Others gloss the derogatory aspect as a lexical presupposition (Cepollaro, 2015; Lycan, 2015) or conventional implicature (McCready, 2010; Vallee, 2014), of *t*. For our purposes, a view counts as semantic if it locates the derogatory aspect entirely on the production side rather than leaving a substantial role for an uptake-centric element (e.g. a widely held belief among A's interlocutors that *t* is derogatory). So, while most of the accounts just mentioned are semantic in the relevant sense, some may not be, depending on the details of how the facts (e.g. about which implicatures or presuppositions *t* generates) are set.

⁶Australian readers unfamiliar with this slur can substitute 'abbo' and 'Aboriginal'; British readers, 'paki' and 'Pakistani'.

⁷These can include names for places ('squaw mountain', 'chinaman's beach'), colors ('nigger brown'), and produce ('kaffir limes'). In each of these cases, there is enduring debate about whether the derived terms are themselves derogatory, and some resistance to attempts to eradicate the terms or rename the objects. Expressions that invoke contemptuous attitudes or demeaning stereotypes without actually tokening a tabooed slur can give rise to similar obtuse uses. Thus speakers often use the expression 'Jew down' (an idiom meaning to bargain aggressively) obtusely until they happen to use it in the presence of someone who is actually Jewish. Similar terms include 'Indian giver' (retracting a gift) and 'gypping'

these terms use the expressions obtusely failing to recognize them as derogatory. When corrected, many such speakers are embarrassed, and say things like “The comment was totally unintentional. I apologise unreservedly for any offence caused”,⁸ and aim to avoid these terms in the future. Some, however, are not so easily convinced, and will instead protest that despite the close connection to derogatory terms, these expressions are not in fact derogatory.⁹

When a slur is contested, its truth-conditional meaning (or designating aspect) is uncontroversial within the community, but there is disagreement about whether it also has a derogatory aspect.¹⁰ Some speakers continue to use the word as an ordinary referring term, perhaps followed by acknowledgment of the controversy, e.g., “but I guess we’re not supposed to say that anymore because it’s ‘offensive’.” Such a speaker *knows* that her broader linguistic community takes the word to be derogatory; she just thinks they are mistaken, and maintains that as *she* uses it, *t* isn’t a slur. She may also have linguistic justifications for being stubborn: she may be unsure whether the replacement term picks out the same group, or have misgivings about its grammatical appropriateness, or note that *t* is still the term preferred by some members of the group.

Often these speakers are members of generational or regional communities in which many of their conversational partners share their view. When ignorant slurring is discussed in the philosophical literature on slurs, the naïve are the primary focus,¹¹ but the stubborn pose by far the harder problem. Stubborn speakers have much in common with speakers of minority linguistic variants. They know that their views on appropriate use conflict with the views and practices dominant in the broader linguistic community; they just don’t think that’s a reason to change their own linguistic behavior. In the case of linguistic variants, the speakers are not wrong. For example, while the forms of Standard English spoken by the broader linguistic community in North America disallow negative concord, a speaker of African-American Vernacular English is not mistaken if she takes “ain’t no one” to be grammatical. She is simply answerable to different rules.

To say that the stubborn *are* mistaken, we will have to ground the fact that *t* is derogatory in something beyond the speaker or her immediate community. A shared language is a natural candidate. But given the LOCALITY of derogatory terms, there are some genuine cases of *talking past*; a term can be powerfully derogatory in one language without being so in another, even if substantial fragments of the spoken languages overlap. So while insisting that *t* is derogatory in the language the stubborn speaker speaks—*our* language—we must still allow that sometimes disagreeing speakers are simply speaking a different language. This is tricky because individuating languages is far from straightforward. English, for example, is not one but several distinct Englishes including British, American, Australian, etc., which are themselves cross-cut by regional, class, and generational dialects (to mention only a few linguistic styles). So what, precisely, is ‘the language the speaker speaks’? And what grounds our claim that *t* is derogatory in that language?

(shortchanging). At some point, as the slur is itself forgotten or ameliorated, the expressions that were once derogatory extensions become dead idioms. Arguably ‘coolie’ (as a name for a style of hat) and ‘paddywagon’ (as a name for a police car) are exemplars. These are the expressions that occasionally end up in listicles with titles like ‘ten phrases that are secretly super offensive!’, though it’s difficult to work out exactly what it is to be ‘secretly offensive’; clearly not that many people are secretly offended.

⁸English MP Anne Morris issued this apology for having obtusely used a slurring idiom in the following remarks she made about Brexit policies:

“Now I am sure there will be many people who will challenge that but my response and my request is look at the detail – it isn’t all doom and gloom. Now we get to the real nigger in the woodpile, which is in two years what happens if there is no deal.”

‘MP Anne Marie Morris suspended for racist remark’, *BBC* July 10 2017 <https://www.bbc.com/news/uk-politics-40555639>

⁹See for instance the Letters to the Editor (<https://www.telegraph.co.uk/opinion/2017/07/11/lettersthe-tory-mp-suspended-theresa-may-uttering-taboo-word/>) and discussion on Language Log (<http://languagelog.ldc.upenn.edu/nll/?p=33594>) prompted by MP Morris’s use of a slurring idiom.

¹⁰More carefully, since some theorists deny that slurs successfully refer to the designated group, we should say that hearers have no difficulty recovering the truth-conditional meaning the utterance would have if *t* is not a slur.

¹¹For example, naïve slur users are briefly discussed (and dismissed as incompetent) in Camp (2013, p.339), Jeshion (2018, §6), and Saka (2007, p. 148). Nunberg (2018) stands out in devoting real attention to the problem posed by stubborn speakers.

2 The Individuation Problem: a more precise restatement

So far I have sketched the general shape of the puzzle, relying heavily on simplifying assumptions and abstracting away from difficult theoretical problems. Now I'll put the point more precisely. Assuming that a language is a mapping of expressions to meanings, a language L^* *deviates* from L iff there are some expressions for which L and L^* assign conflicting meanings.¹² Simplifying greatly, we can say that a speaker's ability to use and understand the terms of a language L has two basic components. The first is her internal representation of the compositional rules and literal meanings of the lexical items in L . This is her *idiolect*, encoding her specifically linguistic knowledge. If the idiolect is something like a dictionary, the second component is like an encyclopedia: it's the world-knowledge she needs to draw on to understand a good deal of pragmatic meanings, conversational implicatures, rich metaphors, and the like. These two components are not on par; a speaker makes a *linguistic error* only if the meaning she assigns to a term t of L in her idiolect conflicts with the meaning of t in L .¹³ If a speaker lacks important world-knowledge, she won't grasp the significance of some of what is said to her in the language L , but she would not be misunderstanding the terms.

If A speaks L^* , which deviates from L with respect to t , speakers of L might ask her to change her use of t , but A is not mistaken about the meaning of t if she maintains that her usage is correct relative to L^* . In this sort of disagreement, A is not wrong; her use is *merely different*. Rather, it is the speakers who take the conventions (grammar, lexicon, pronunciation, etc.) of L to have normative force over speakers of a deviating L^* that are mistaken.¹⁴ So if being a derogatory term is simply a matter of having certain semantic content, then to vindicate B 's claim that a stubborn speaker A should avoid t *because t is derogatory*, we need a way to individuate languages that simultaneously clears three hurdles:

- (i) It must imply that A shares a language L with B with respect to the meaning of t , and
- (ii) imply that A misunderstands t because the meaning of t in L is determinately derogatory, but still
- (iii) accommodate the DEROGATORY AUTONOMY, UPTAKE INDEPENDENCE, SOCIAL-CONTEXT DEPENDENCE, and LOCALITY of derogatory terms.

2.1 Flat-footed approaches

Some prominent views are non-starters. Strong forms of individualism (such as those implicit in Chomsky (1975), Davidson (1986)) reduce talk of 'shared languages' to overlap in individual speakers' idiolects, corrected for inconsistencies and performance errors. On such a picture, A "shares a language" with B with respect to a term t just if the meanings each assigns to t agree. It is thus impossible for speakers who speak the same language to assign conflicting meanings; when speakers disagree about the meaning of a term, they in fact speak different languages with respect to that term. This way of individuating languages has some virtues. It is readily able to accommodate the rapid semantic drift exhibited by derogatory terms, and can explain why which terms are derogatory should be such a local matter. However, the cost of making languages so individual is that all cases of ignorant slurring collapse into mere talking past. This approach clears the first hurdle — it gives a clear answer to whether A and B speak the same language — but it falls on the second: it cannot ground the claim that A misunderstands t . While there might be instrumental

¹²British English deviates from American English with respect to 'biscuit': Brits use it to designate a sweet baked good, while Americans use it for a savory one. A language must also include rules for *composing* meaningful expressions, but because none of the discussion to follow hangs on variance in syntactic rules, I'll leave this important aspect of languages out in what follows.

¹³There are of course many other errors involving language that a speaker might make. Bracketing performance errors and inconsistencies in her idiolect, she could make a mistake about the meaning of a term in her idiolect, she could mispronounce it, or use it in an inappropriate setting. She could make grammatical errors. She could also use the wrong linguistic forms for her purposes, and thus fail to coordinate with others in virtue of her linguistic behavior. But none of these are the type of error Kaplan was referring to.

¹⁴This is the error that some speakers of American Standard English variants have made concerning African-American Vernacular and Hawai'i English, as many linguists have pointed out (See Pullum, 2006, for nice discussion).

reasons for her to change her idiolect (altering her language), A makes no linguistic mistake if she instead carries on using *t* with the non-derogatory meaning she has assigned it.

On an alternative approach, shared languages exist independently of any particular speaker's idiolect. Individuals acquire a language over time, and typically have an incomplete and inaccurate grasp of it. An L-speaker's idiolect is just her best theory of the language L, and if her idiolect diverges from L, the speaker is mistaken. This can clear the second hurdle — speakers whose idiolects diverge from the meanings assigned by the shared language are wrong about the term's meaning — but owes us an account of when speakers share a language rather than speaking distinct languages. We obviously cannot appeal directly to speakers' idiolects, since we need a way to distinguish mistaken L-speakers from perfectly competent speakers a diverging language L*, and such speakers might easily have the same idiolect. There are two ways to do this that will still deliver determinate verdicts about what *t* means in the language: individuating languages by anchored meanings, or individuating meanings by communities.

The first route (present to varying degrees in Putnam (1975), Burge (1979), Kripke (1980), Kaplan (1989), and more recently Lepore and Stone (2017)) appeals to causal-historical chains which 'anchor' the meanings of certain terms, and counts speakers as members of the same community when their terms share a common anchor. Though this need not treat the meaning of a term *t* as determined by the *intentions* of the speaker who introduces *t*, it does commit to there being a fixed fact about what *t* means in the language, that is settled by the coordinated inputs of the environment and social practices. For example, though the meaning of 'Bromance' now outstrips what was intended by Dave Carnie, who coined the term, this is (on this picture) *not* because the meaning has shifted, but because "our community has come a long way in *understanding* what bromance is".¹⁵ Because the meaning is set in part by the nature of the referent, and in part by the total practices of the community, substantial portions of the linguistic community—indeed, nearly all of it—can at some point be ignorant of the full meaning without destabilizing the term's meaning in the language. The term will have the same meaning for all speakers whose connection to it runs through the same causal-historical chain.¹⁶ For all of these speakers, there is some stable fact about what *t* actually means, and insofar as their idiolect diverges from that, the speaker is mistaken about the meaning of *t*.

This can give a determinate answer, for any speakers A and B, to whether they share a language with respect to *t*, provided we can determine whether they inherited the term through the same casual-historical chain. It also holds that there is a fact about what *t* means in L, to which L-speakers are answerable. However, precisely because these meanings are so stable, this way of construing meaning in language can't accommodate the rapid pejoration or amelioration exhibited by derogatory terms. It under-generates, predicting that terms that were once genuinely non-derogatory remain so (and so misclassifies terms like 'retarded' and 'colored'). It also over-generates, implying that terms that were once derogatory remain so, which is arguably the wrong result for terms that have been reclaimed or forgotten (e.g. 'black', 'queer', 'paddy').¹⁷ It thus fails the third hurdle, unable to accommodate the linguistic profile of slurs.

The second route, appealing to linguistic communities to individuate languages, is better able to accommodate linguistic drift. Lewis (1975)'s convention-based approach is a strategy of this kind, casting the shared language L as

¹⁵Lepore and Stone (2017) p. 14, emphasis in the original. They offer this case to demonstrate that lexical innovations can be accommodated by the causal-historical chain picture of conventional shared meanings: rather than receiving its meaning from the intentions of the introducer, 'bromance' latches on to some concept in the world, and it is 'the whole community' that together discovers the contours of this concept, and hence what the term has always meant.

¹⁶This stability is what makes the account unable to accommodate linguistic drift, as Lassiter (2008) and Armstrong (2016) point out, and Armstrong advocates replacing this static conception of semantic conventions with a dynamic one, which is better able to accommodate local differences within a larger community. I will discuss more dynamic approaches in the next section, but since they introduce indeterminacy about whether a disagreeing set of speakers in fact speak the same language, they are best considered separately.

¹⁷For discussion of these terms, see Allan and Burridge (2006). These failures are illuminating. Given the over- and under-generation problems, it appears that an *actual etymological link* to derogatory origins is neither necessary nor sufficient for a term to be a derogatory term in a language. Tentatively, this suggests that appealing to etymology to settle which speaker is right about whether or not *t* is derogatory is akin to a pedant's appeal to Latin Grammar to settle questions about proper English: it is a cross-linguistic consideration that fails to give current speakers of L a reason to change their linguistic practices, or a way to settle open questions about L.

the mapping of expressions to meanings for which there is a convention of truth and trust among the members of the community.¹⁸ But what this counts as the community's language is highly sensitive to how the boundaries are drawn: changing the membership will change whether a practice is sufficiently widespread to be a *convention*, rather than merely a regularity among a sub-population. So to get a determinate answer about the meaning of *t* in the language, we will need to first set determinate bounds on the relevant community.

Here, as Lassiter (2008) details, we run into trouble: there are a dizzying number of non-equivalent but equally justified ways to group speakers into linguistic communities, and it is impossible to justify privileging one as *the* way of defining a language. Some options that would give us precise communities can be dismissed out of hand as too arbitrary, such as defining communities along sharp geographic or political boundaries. Others are clearly too expansive, for example taking the set of all speakers whose idiolects are pair-wise mutually intelligible, or whose idiolects have a non-empty intersection. Lassiter's own proposal individuates linguistic communities by speakers' *projections*, as mapped by their dispositions about whom they will defer to when corrected. A speaker makes a linguistic mistake when the meaning her idiolect assigns to *t* conflicts with the meaning assigned by those to whom she aims to defer, but simply speaks a different dialect otherwise.¹⁹ This would secure the normativity of meaning for naïve and obtuse speakers, but it can't address our main challenge. Stubborn speakers are *not* disposed to defer to the broader community about the meaning of contested slurs, so the deference-dispositions approach will count them as speaking a different dialect, collapsing into *talking past*.²⁰

2.2 More promising: textured languages

There are more nuanced ways of developing each of these views, which are better positioned to clear the second and third hurdles (grounding normativity and accommodating the linguistic profile of slurs).²¹ They accomplish this in part by recognizing that linguistic communities are highly *textured* and dynamic, and 'the shared language' is in some ways a fiction: populations of speakers do not all, or even mostly all, abide by the same fully specific linguistic conventions, nor are the conventions static.

Networks of speakers within a broader community in fact engage in a host of overlapping but slightly variant linguistic conventions, and individual speakers often participate in many different conventions in various contexts (e.g. speaking in one style at work and another at home). These local networks of interactions are the main engines of semantic drift and language change, as the meanings negotiated and established in local networks occasionally propagate through the community more broadly, reshaping wider conventions. Because different clusters of speakers are unevenly exposed to sources of linguistic drift, resultant lexical innovations and shifts propagate through the community unevenly; for instance, young urban speakers tend to evolve linguistically at a faster rate than their older or rural counterparts.²² This has the effect of creating a cacophony of overlapping micro-linguistic communities

¹⁸A community C speaks a language L iff a convention of truth & trust with respect to L is a regularity in C. Lewis (1975) acknowledges that this implies that when a community speaks L, they also speak L-, for every substantial fragment L- of L. Further, they also speak overlapping non-equivalent extensions L+, and it can be interest-relative which is 'the language'.

¹⁹Higginbotham (2008) and Heck (2006) offer idiolect-first proposals that yield this same construal of linguistic mistakes.

²⁰Nunberg (2018, p.60) raises a slightly different problem with appeals to deference, directed at Hom (2008)'s account. Hom argues that naïve speakers' uses are derogatory because the semantic content of slurs is externally determined by racist institutions in a society. But Nunberg points out that a naïve or obtuse speaker is *not* disposed to mean whatever racists, etc., mean by *t*; she took herself to not be derogating, and displays a preference *against* meaning something derogatory.

²¹I cannot survey all the options here, and will instead mention only a couple types, individuating linguistic communities by sufficient overlap (i) in the sets of other speakers who are taken into account in A's continuing construction of her linguistic understanding (Begby, 2016), or (ii) in relevant presupposed knowledge *about* the terms (Jackson, 2010), or (iii) in idiolects *given* the present communicative purposes (Heck, 2006). And of course there are many others.

²²Many different factors can cause linguistic drift, though there are a few that are especially likely to do so. Close contact to other dialects, or participation in an industry with field-specific jargon, or interaction with technological innovations, tend to lead speakers to borrow or coin new terms. Similarly, having a large social network increases the chance that a given speaker will be exposed to a variation, while having a small

with indeterminate boundaries along a variety of cross-cutting dimensions, with linguistic practices which diverge syntactically, phonologically, and semantically from each other and the broader community.

Slang terms evolve especially quickly, as sub-populations seek linguistic styles to set themselves apart from other social groups. As Nunberg (2018) emphasizes, many slurs originate in sub-populations, taking on a derogatory aspect for only a small network of speakers before being taken up by the broader community.²³ Nunberg is also emphatic that terms and conventions are features of *discourse* practices, rather than populations *per se*; a single speaker can participate in multiple discourse practices, and the differentiations between practices are vague and interest-sensitive. A term mid-drift—either on its way to becoming widely-accepted as derogatory, or in the process of being reclaimed—will plausibly have a derogatory aspect in the discourse of one network while lacking it in an adjacent network.²⁴ Only views acknowledging that linguistic communities are textured in this way are well-positioned to accommodate the linguistic profile of slurs, explaining the rapid drift (amelioration and pejoration) typical of derogatory terms.

However, it is unlikely that such a nuanced view can maintain that a stubborn speaker is simply mistaken about the semantic content of *t* in the language she speaks. There is some pressure against the linguistic practices of networks diverging too greatly: speakers across networks remain tied to each other by a mutual interest in communicative coordination, for which they need to be able to assume that their interlocutors assign roughly the same meanings to the terms used. But as Heck (2006) and others emphasize, successful communication is a strongly interest-sensitive affair, and the set of speakers relevant for an exchange is highly variable, so even these pressures will leave communities far from uniform. When a speaker's local network diverges from the broader community concerning the meaning of an expression *t*, it is not straightforward what *t*'s semantic content is “in her language”, or whether she makes a linguistic mistake in understanding the expression's meaning. Suppose that Gus is a botanist who knows that ‘nut’ refers to hard-shelled pods containing both the fruit and seed of a plant, which do not split open at maturity to release the seed. He also knows that many speakers in the broader linguistic community use the term expansively to include some seeds of drupe fruits (e.g. walnuts, pecans, pistachios, cashews, almonds) and legumes (peanuts).²⁵ If Gus were to say “peanuts aren't a nut”, intending to use ‘nut’ with the meaning it has in his botanist-network rather than deferring to the general public, he wouldn't be simply mistaken about the term's meaning. The fact that in the broader community ‘nut’ means something more expansive does not, it seems, render Gus incompetent with the term.

This is not to say that we cannot ground important prescriptive claims about Gus's use of ‘nut’. Imagine Gus brings peanut brownies to his daughter's daycare, and says “there are no nuts in these brownies.” We need not say that Gus is mistaken about the meaning of ‘nut’ in order to offer him weighty reasons to shift his linguistic practices to align with those in the broader community. Instead, we can point to uptake-based considerations: given the conventional meaning of ‘nut’ among those with whom Gus sometimes speaks, stubbornly using ‘nut’ in the narrow way risks endangering the life of someone with a peanut allergy. So Gus should stop using ‘nut’ in this way when he can expect his hearers to interpret the term more expansively.

social network increases the chances that, if exposed, she will adopt the variation herself (see Milroy & Milroy, 1985, for a canonical discussion).

²³Preliminary analysis of public comments on reddit (from 2007-2015, dataset provided by Baumgartner, 2015) suggests that ‘TERF’ and ‘SJW’ (acronyms for ‘trans-exclusionary radical feminist’ and ‘social justice warrior’, respectively) are contested slurs on the ascent: initially, each occurred relatively infrequently, in subreddits both aligned with the identified group and antagonistic toward the group. The next phase of the pattern is more pronounced with SJW than TERF: as occurrences of the term in the antagonistic subreddits increase in frequency, it appears increasingly strongly associated with the antagonist attitudes, and quickly spreads to other subreddits, with use increasing exponentially and predominately occurring in negative or derogatory contexts. This corresponds with a decrease in positive-context uses or uses of the term in subreddits that align with the target group. At any stage in this development, speakers from adjacent subcommunities could reasonably disagree whether the term was derogatory: it is and operates as one in some subreddits, is not in others, and is unknown in still others. (My thanks to Colin Klein for running analyses and providing me with summaries of this dataset.)

²⁴Theorists writing about slurs have not been blind to this. Lycan (2015), for instance, holds that whether a term is derogatory varies between dialects within a population, but focuses on the variance between the derogatory and reclaimed senses of a slur, rather than recognizing the existence of speakers in whose discourse the terms are not *yet* derogatory.

²⁵This example is borrowed from Begby (2014), who offers it in support of an argument that the values of communicative coordination and testimony underwrite the prescriptive force of linguistic conventions, rather than the other way around.

In saying this, we are not saying that Gus is mistaken in thinking that as he uses it, the semantic content of ‘nut’ excludes legumes. Nor are we offering wholly non-linguistic reasons for him to alter his use. Rather, the reasons are grounded in the function and value of the linguistic practice for the broader community. Many of the purposes of a shared linguistic practice—reliable transmission of information through testimony, coordination, etc.—crucially require that speakers who have not previously interacted be able to assume that they mean and understand roughly the same things by the expressions used. While deviations like Gus’s are not incompetent, they threaten the safety of the crucial assumption. So we can appeal to the values of shared linguistic practice to justify demanding that Gus shift his usage to align with the meanings he can reasonably expect his hearers will interpret ‘nut’ as having. For lack of a better term, I will say that appeals to how an expression uttered will be *interpreted* by arbitrary nearby speakers invoke the ‘uptake-centric’ aspects of the expression’s meaning.

3 Upshots for Contested Slurs

If a stubborn speaker A regularly interacts with others whose communicative practices do not take *t* to be derogatory, then it is hard to deny that she is a member of a community in whose language *t* is not derogatory, even if she is also a member of a broader community in which *t* is derogatory. If derogatory terms have different semantic content than non-derogatory terms, then unless derogatory terms are *sui generis*, a textured view of linguistic communities must allow that, just as ‘nut’ has both narrow and expansive meanings, and ‘livid’ means both *pale* and *red*, a contested slur has both a derogatory meaning and a non-derogatory one. Further, it will be at best indeterminate which of these is ‘the’ meaning, which leaves us in an awkward spot semantically.²⁶ Given that both meanings have currency, the claim that stubborn speakers are just mistaken in thinking that the semantic content of these terms is non-derogatory is tenuous at best. The parallel claim about those who use ‘nut’ to exclude peanuts clearly fails: since both meanings have currency in the shared language, we lack grounds to insist that, despite the speaker’s intentions and context, peanuts are included in the extension of ‘nut’.

The upshot of all of this is that the stubborn speaker poses a formidable challenge for semantic accounts of derogation. Putting our observations above into an argument form: if the derogatory aspect is semantic, then whether A derogates in using *t* depends on *t*’s semantic content. The semantic content of a term in a language is set by the language, and A has a plausible claim to speaking a language in which *t* is not semantically derogatory. So to say that A’s use of *t* derogates, we must solve the language-individuation problem (find an account that simultaneously clears all three hurdles). If we cannot, then stubborn speakers do not derogate when they use *t*, anymore than Gus speaks falsely in saying that his brownies contain no nuts. They merely risk being misunderstood.

If we locate the derogation instead in an uptake-centric aspect of meaning, then whether *t* derogates is a question of how the speaker can reasonably expect it to be understood (akin to whether ‘nut’ will be *interpreted* as excluding peanuts), and the problem of language-individuation can be safely set to the side. The central consideration is not what language the speaker is using, but rather whether the relevant social conditions obtain among the people to whom the speaker is linguistically connected.²⁷ There are several proposals for how to fill in the details of this sort of approach: Nunberg (2018) suggests that terms “convey the prevalent attitudes in the discourse they’re linked to”; Vallee (2014), Blakemore (2015), and Bolinger (2015) that the choice to use a slur rather than an alternative constitutes endorsing

²⁶The awkwardness of this implication varies depending on the particular account. More robustly semantic accounts will imply that while *t* exists as a simple group-referring term relative to some dialects, relative to others it is (respectively) a thickly moralizing predicate with empty extension (Hom, 2010); an expressive that makes no truth-conditional contribution to propositions (Hedger, 2012); a term that, because it encodes a derogatory representation, renders assertions that employ it non-truth-evaluable (Richard, 2008); or encodes a secondary proposition to the effect that members of the group are contemptible (Bach, 2018). Accounts that analyze the derogatory aspect of slurs as based in a rule of use (Jeshion, 2013a), or lexical presupposition (Schlenker, 2007) can maintain that both variants of *t* make the same truth-conditional contribution, but must allow that the sub-community’s variant lacks the additional features that give rise to derogation.

²⁷I avoid calling this an ‘extra-linguistic’ consideration, since while it is not semantic, it is concerned with the conventional communicative significance of expression-types in the language, rather than arising from general-purpose reasoning about features local to a specific token context of use.

the attitudes or stereotypes socially associated with slur-use; Anderson and Lepore (2013) that a term derogates if it violates a social taboo against using the term. On each of these uptake-centric accounts, whether *t* is a derogatory term is determined by the predominant beliefs and expectations among those in the web of linguistic interactions with the speaker, and is thus independent of the speaker's idiolect, intentions, or deference dispositions. The stuff of central importance are the stable expectations of the people in the linguistic-interaction networks connected to a given speaker. Which speakers are *connected* in the relevant sense will be vague and indeterminate in all the ways that linguistic communities are vague and indeterminate, but this seems true to the phenomena, and we no longer require determinacy. When it is reasonable for a speaker to expect that her use of *t* will be taken to be derogatory, these accounts yield the verdict that she has sufficient reason to adjust her linguistic practice. Of course it will not always be clear whether it is reasonable for a speaker to expect this; uptake-centric views do not dissolve disagreements about whether a term is derogatory. They instead relocate the dispute to be about the attitudes of those who are linguistically-connected to the speaker, rather than about the lexicon of the speaker's particular language. This approach implies that when no one linguistically connected to the speaker takes *t* to be derogatory, her use of *t* is not derogatory, even if (amongst others) *t* is a contested slur. Once we are careful to distinguish between *taking t to not be derogatory* from merely *finding it inoffensive*—e.g. because of taking it to be aptly derogatory—this implication should not be troublesome. It is simply a consequence of the LOCALITY of slurs.

Uptake-centric accounts fit nicely with two widely-held intuitions about derogatory terms: (a) that we should generally defer to a group's stated preferences concerning the terms we use for them, and (b) that members of the targeted group are linguistic authorities on whether *t* is a derogatory term. If a speaker is linguistically-connected to members of G who find *t* derogatory, that fact in itself gives her some uptake-based reason to avoid using *t* to refer to them. Plausibly, this reason is stronger when it comes from members of G than from others: when A is not a member of G herself, and *t* is an exonym (a term which the members of G have rejected), failing to respect their preferences about which terms are used to refer to G signals contempt. When derogation is not appropriate, then, group-members' stated preference against *t* may suffice to make deference obligatory.²⁸ Of course weaponised uses of slurs—those *intended* to cause harm—are more powerfully derogatory than a merely stubborn use. But this seems to me like the right sort of explanation for the way in which stubborn speakers' uses are in fact derogatory, despite their intentions.

Notice that the simple intuitive argument in §1.2 from what it takes to understand the meaning of slurring terms does not favor the semantic analysis over these approaches. Uptake-centric aspects are still important parts of the meanings of words, so if you don't know that others who are linguistically connected to you are likely to interpret your using *t* as derogating, you don't fully understand the word. Again the parallel with 'nut' is helpful: if a speaker knows the narrow botanist-sense of the term, but is unaware that most hearers will interpret it as including peanuts, almonds, etc., then she is ignorant of an important part of the meaning of the word 'nut' in this community. Our judgments of competence track *communicative competence*, and thus require speakers to know *what will be taken to have been said* as well as *what is literally said*. For this reason, they aren't a good test for the semantic contents of terms.

So what should we say to stubborn speakers? Recall that our initial motivation was simply to say that they do in fact have reason to stop using contested slurs, and moreover this is because the terms derogate the target groups. When we ask the stubborn speaker to stop using contested slurs, there are two sorts of reasons we could be giving:

1. linguistic reasons *internal to their dialect* that they are mistaken about the meaning of *t*
2. instrumental/moral reasons to defer to a majority dialect, *even if it is not what they currently speak*.

The first of these can only be levied from within a language, and requires determinacy about the meaning of the contested terms. The second is a form of normativity about linguistic behavior that can get a grip even within highly textured linguistic communities, but concedes that the speaker might be right about the semantic content of her terms.

²⁸Understood this way, the wrongs involved in using slurs have deep and potentially fruitful parallels to the wrongs involved in 'deadnaming'—referring to a transgender person by using their birth name, rather than their current or preferred name. In the case of deadnames, a semantic analysis is less tempting, but the social analysis seems appropriate.

If it is important to be able to rebuke stubborn speakers for in fact derogating, then the difficulty involved in grounding this rebuke in the semantics of contested slurs is some reason to prefer a non-semantic (uptake-centric) account of the derogatory aspect of slurs. If we are content to offer moral rather than linguistic reasons, and are willing to give up grounding our complaint in the claim that stubborn speakers *misunderstand the meaning* of the terms, then the considerations I have raised don't tell between semantic and non-semantic accounts. Either way, the fact that stubborn speakers make some mistake, and can appropriately be asked to change their linguistic behavior, is not evidence in favor of a semantic analysis of the derogatory aspect of slurs. Non-semantic views are at least equally well-positioned to offer instrumental and moral reasons against remaining stubborn.

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