

REMARKS ON “THE SEMANTICS OF RACIAL SLURS”

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ABSTRACT. In “The Semantics of Racial Slurs,” an article recently published in *Linguistic and Philosophical Investigations*, Hedger (2012) draws upon Kaplan’s (1999) distinction between descriptive and expressive content to argue that slurs are expressions with purely expressive content. Here I review the key considerations presented by Hedger (2012) in support of his purely expressive account of slurs and provide clear reasons for why it must ultimately be rejected. After reviewing the key cases Hedger (2012) offers for consideration in support of his view that slurs are expressions with purely expressive content, this article provides a critical evaluation of these cases, pointing out at least 13 ways in which his purely expressive analysis of slurs fails. In considering the 13 ways in which the purely expressive analysis of slurs remains inadequate, this article concludes with the suggestion that an adequate account of slurs will ultimately involve not only an expressive aspect but a descriptive aspect also.

Keywords: slurs, epithets, philosophy of language, semantics, pragmatics, expressivism

1. Introduction

In “The Semantics of Racial Slurs,” an article recently published in *Linguistic and Philosophical Investigations*, Hedger (2012) draws upon Kaplan’s (1999) distinction between descriptive and expressive content to argue that slurs are expressions with purely expressive content.¹ In this article I review the key considerations presented by Hedger (2012) in support of his purely expressive account of slurs and provide clear reasons for why it must ultimately be rejected. After reviewing the key cases Hedger (2012) offers for consideration in support of his view that slurs are expressions with purely expressive content, this article provides a critical evaluation of these cases, pointing out at least 13 ways in which his purely expressive analysis of slurs fails. In considering the 13 ways in which the purely expressive

analysis of slurs remains inadequate, this article concludes with the suggestion that an adequate account of slurs will ultimately involve not only an expressive aspect but a descriptive aspect also.

2. Slurs as Purely Expressive Expressions

The use of a slur – such as *chink* or *whore* – has often been characterized as a form of “hate speech [...] directed to a group of people, based on a shared characteristic of that group” (Fraleigh & Tuman 2010, p. 139), with racial slurs such as *chink* being used primarily to target people on the basis of race-based features and sexual slurs such as *whore* being used primarily to target people on the basis of sex-based features. In his article “The Semantics of Racial Slurs,” Hedger (2012) draws upon the distinction between descriptive and expressive content in order to provide an analysis of slurring expressions and to argue that slurs are expressions with purely expressive content.² The distinction between descriptive and expressive content, as Hedger (2012) explains, consists in the fact that “*descriptive* content [...] represents the world as being a certain way, and as such can be either true or false” whereas “*expressive* content [...] merely display[s] an attitude of the speaker, and as such are not truth-apt” (p. 76). Hedger (2012) offers examples of expressions with purely descriptive and purely expressive content; for instance, expressions with purely descriptive content including *black* and *elephant* (p. 78) and examples of expressions with purely expressive content including *fucker* (p. 77) and all slurring expressions (p. 74, 78).

Since expressions with purely descriptive content are typically inoffensive whereas expressions with purely expressive content are typically offensive, by arguing that slurs are expressions with purely expressive content Hedger (2012) aims to account for the inoffensiveness of expressions like *Chinese American* and the offensiveness of expressions like *chink*. This particularly salient ability of slurs to offend is best accounted for, Hedger (2012) proposes, by adopting a purely expressive account of slurs: “The view here offered for your consideration is that slurs contain merely expressive content – i.e., they display an attitude of contempt on the part of the speaker toward their targets – but they lack an extension, and hence don’t make truth-apt contributions to semantic content” (p. 77–78).

Drawing upon the work of Kaplan (1999), Hedger (2012) adopts a strict distinction between expressions with purely descriptive and purely expressive content such that the content of each expression is either descriptive or expressive but not mixed. The argumentative strategy that Hedger (2012) will resultantly adopt is that of aiming to show that slurs are not expressions with purely descriptive content and so must be expressions with purely expressive content instead. So the first step Hedger (2012) takes aims to

demonstrate that slurs are not expressions with purely descriptive content by showing that the projection behavior of slurs differs markedly from that of expressions with purely descriptive content, and that the two must therefore be distinct.

Hedger (2012) provides several examples showing how the projection behavior of slurs differs from that of expressions with purely descriptive content, and examples such as these have already been well-discussed in prior work (Potts 2007; Hom 2008; Potts, Asudeh, Cable, Hara, McCready, Alonso-Ovalle, Bhatt, Davis, Kratzer, Roeper, & Walkow 2009; Williamson 2009; Hom 2010; McCready 2010; Croom 2011; Hom 2012; Anderson & Lepore 2013; Croom 2013a; Hay 2013; Whiting 2013). So for the purposes of our analysis it will suffice to review just one such example that Hedger (2012) considers involving the comparison between (1) and (2) below, “when *S* is a slur normally used to target blacks” (p. 78):

(1) If David is intelligent, then so is Judith.³

(2) If Obama is an *S*, then so is his wife.⁴

The basic point being made with an example like this is that, whereas a speaker of (1) can still plausibly deny that they have expressed anything about David (since *intelligent*, an expression with purely descriptive content,⁵ is embedded within the antecedent of the conditional), a speaker of (2) *cannot* still plausibly deny that they have expressed anything about Obama (even though the slurring expression *S* is likewise embedded within the antecedent of the conditional). Consider another example below that is perhaps clearer since the comparison it involves between (3) and (4) more closely approximates a minimal pair and actually provides a concrete example of the slur under investigation:

(3) If I didn’t like *Chinese Americans*, then I’d probably be racist.

(4) If I didn’t like *chinks*, then I’d probably be racist.

Since in (3) the descriptive expression *Chinese American* is embedded within the antecedent of the conditional, it is clear that a speaker uttering (3) does not generate the inference that they are racist simply in virtue of uttering (3). The speaker of (3) is only committed to saying that they probably would be racist *if in fact* they did not like Chinese Americans, but that is an *if* they can plausibly deny. So the scope of the descriptive expression *Chinese American* is restricted by the conditional and does not project out to generate the inference that the speaker uttering (3) presumably holds racist views. But notice that in (4), although the slurring expression *chinks* is embedded within the antecedent of the conditional, the derogatory force of *chinks* still manages to *project out* of its embedded position to generate the inference that the speaker uttering (4) presumably holds racist views. “For if the speaker were not currently in possession of derogatory

attitudes,” Croom (2011) notes, “there are many other non-derogatory neutral descriptive terms that the speaker could have used, for instance, by saying” something like (3) instead of (4) (p. 345). Slurs “exist in the language as alternatives to other words,” Finlay (2005) similarly notes, or else “Why would a speaker call a person a ‘faggot’ rather than homosexual, or a ‘nigger’ rather than a Black or African-American? This choice of terminology is explained by the intention to express contempt towards a group” (p. 19). So in considering examples like those above showing how the projection behavior of slurs differs markedly from that of expressions with purely descriptive content, Hedger (2012) seems to have offered a good case in support of the claim that slurs are not purely descriptive expressions.

After arguing that slurs are not purely descriptive expressions, Hedger (2012) then proceeds to further argue that slurs are expressions that are purely expressive instead. Here Hedger (2012) attempts to reinforce the strict conceptual bifurcation between expressions with purely descriptive and purely expressive content by attempting to demonstrate that slurs “lack descriptive content whatsoever” (p. 77) and “that slurs contain merely expressive content” (p. 78). Hedger (2012) argues for this further claim that slurs are purely expressive by asking us to consider three key cases: (1) that “When I would look up certain cuss words [in Spanish] I noticed that different dictionaries would give very different English expressions as translations” and so “It occurred to me that a vast number of derogatory expressions (particularly those considered most offensive) don’t obviously differ in meaning” (p. 77); (2) that we consider “the person who, while working on a car, hurls a wrench in frustration and yells “fucker!” It would be odd to claim that this person has described the wrench or the car as being a certain way” since a purely expressive expression like *fucker* “doesn’t describe [...] at all, but merely expresses an attitude of contempt” (p. 77); (3) that we consider the following case, “when S is a slur normally used to target blacks, and the utterer of (17) [provided in (5) below] points⁶ to, say, a person of Swedish decent” (p. 78):

(5) That person is an S.⁷

Of (5) Hedger (2012) claims that “this utterance still manages to be offensive, and that a Swede who felt that the speaker was expressing contempt toward him would not thereby be making a linguistic error” (p. 78). So in providing these three key cases for consideration – (1) where Hedger (2012) found different translations for English “cuss words” in Spanish, (2) where “It would be odd to claim that this person [that yells *fucker* in frustration] has described the wrench or the car as being a certain way” (p. 77), and (3) where “a person of Swedish decent” still manages to be offended by “a slur normally used to target blacks” (p. 78) – Hedger (2012) claims to have

presented a compelling case in support of his purely expressive view that, not only are slurs not purely descriptive, slurs further “lack descriptive content whatsoever” and “contain merely expressive content” (p. 77, 78).

3. Problems with Considering Slurs as Purely Expressive Expressions

Although Hedger (2012) has a persuasive case in support of his claim that slurring expressions and expressions with purely descriptive content are distinct, he has not yet adequately argued in support of his further claim that expressions with purely expressive content are the only alternative to expressions with purely descriptive content and that slurring expressions must therefore be purely expressive rather than purely descriptive. For a mixed or hybrid account of slurs, in which slurs are most aptly considered as expressions with both descriptive and expressive aspects, still remains an open possibility and has in fact been productively explored in the recent literature on slurs (Croom 2010; Croom 2011; Croom 2012; Croom 2013a; Croom 2013b). The purpose of this section is aimed at offering insight into the reasons why one might consider rejecting a purely expressive account of slurs in favor of exploring a mixed or hybrid approach to slurs instead.

Recall that Hedger (2012) offered three key cases to consider in support of his view that slurs lack descriptive content altogether (p. 77–78). The first case was where Hedger (2012) found different translations for English “cuss words” in Spanish (p. 77), with him arguing that since “different dictionaries would give very different English expressions as translations” for these “cuss words,” it therefore seemed plausible to conclude that “a vast number of derogatory expressions (particularly those considered most offensive) don’t obviously differ in meaning” (p. 77). So here Hedger (2012) takes an analysis of “cuss words” that suggests different “cuss words” “don’t obviously differ in meaning” and assumes that from this analysis a conclusion about “slurs” can be straightforwardly drawn, namely, that different “slurs” don’t obviously differ in meaning either.

But a problem here arises from the fact that Hedger (2012) treats “cuss words” like *fucker* as equivalent to “slurs” like *chink*, considering both as similar examples of “epithets” (p. 74, 76–77), and then illegitimately draws conclusions about “slurs” from an analysis of “cuss words.” This maneuver is problematic, however, since “cuss words” like *fucker* function in a way that is linguistically quite distinct from “slurs” like *chink* and the two must accordingly be treated as distinct types of expressions. This point is now widely uncontroversial. For instance, Hom (2010, 2012) and Whiting (2013) have distinguished between “swear words” like *fucker* and “slurs” like *chink*, Croom (2011, 2013) and Gutzmann (2011) have distinguished between “pure expressives” like *fucker* and “slurs” like *chink*, and Hay (2013) has

distinguished between “general pejoratives” like *fucker* and “slurs” like *chink*. Nonetheless, it might be useful to briefly inspect how purely expressive expressions like *fucker* function in a way that is distinct from slurring expressions like *chink* for the purpose of achieving clarity on this point. Let us then first briefly review how expressions with purely expressive content differ markedly from expressions with purely descriptive content, and then subsequently turn to more clearly inspect how slurs are distinct from both purely expressive and purely descriptive expressions.

Consider the following examples below, with purely expressive and purely descriptive expressions in predicate position ((6a) and (7a) respectively) and NP position ((6c) and (7c) respectively):

(6a) T is a *fucker*, but I deny saying anything about his [x]^d.

(7a) T is a *Chinese American*, but I deny saying anything about his [x]^d.

(6c) That *fucker* is my classmate, but I deny saying anything about his [x]^d.

(7c) That *Chinese American* is my classmate, but I deny saying anything about his [x]^d.

Let [x]^d represent a variable that admits only of expressions with purely descriptive content. Substituting expressions with purely descriptive content for [x]^d in the examples above shows that the substitution of certain purely descriptive contents blocks the felicity of purely descriptive cases (7a) and (7c), but does not block the felicity of purely expressive cases (6a) and (6c). This is suggested in the examples involving substitutions below:

(6b) T is a *fucker*, but I deny saying anything about his [racial identity].

(7b) T is a *Chinese American*, but I deny saying anything about his [racial identity].*

(6d) That *fucker* is my classmate, but I deny saying anything about his [racial identity].

(7d) That *Chinese American* is my classmate, but I deny saying anything about his [racial identity].*

Since the particular descriptive features of the target T are inessential to the *speaker* indicating *their own* emotional state, in purely expressive cases (6b) and (6d) the speaker can felicitously call a target a *fucker* while denying that their utterance has anything to do with *certain (e.g. racial) descriptive features* of that target at all.

Although Hedger (2012) may be right in considering expressions like *fucker* as purely expressive, he is quite wrong in considering expressions like *chink* as purely expressive also. For even if we grant that *fucker* is purely expressive it is clear that this is not the case with slurs like *chink*. This can be observed below:

- (6a) T is a *fucker*, but I deny saying anything about his [x]^d.
 (7a) T is a *Chinese American*, but I deny saying anything about his [x]^d.
 (8a) T is a *chink*, but I deny saying anything about his [x]^d.

- (6b) T is a *fucker*, but I deny saying anything about his [racial identity].
 (7b) T is a *Chinese American*, but I deny saying anything about his [racial identity].*
 (8b) T is a *chink*, but I deny saying anything about his [racial identity].*

Observe that whereas the purely expressive case (6b) is felicitous on the grounds that expressions with purely expressive content do not pick out or target certain specific descriptive features (such as racial identity) and can therefore be felicitously uttered while denying some particular set of descriptive features (such as racial identity) to its target, the slurring case (8b) is not likewise felicitous. So in this respect the slurring case (8b) is not like the purely expressive case (6b) but is instead rather like the purely descriptive case (7b). Evidently this point is not specific to racial slurs but is a general point applying to others such as sexual slurs, for consider also the following examples:

- (9a) T is a *fucker*, but I deny saying anything about her [x]^d.
 (10a) T is a *woman*, but I deny saying anything about her [x]^d.
 (11a) T is a *whore*, but I deny saying anything about her [x]^d.
 (9b) T is a *fucker*, but I deny saying anything about her [sexual identity].
 (10b) T is a *woman*, but I deny saying anything about her [sexual identity].*
 (11b) T is a *whore*, but I deny saying anything about her [sexual identity].*

Observe that whereas the purely expressive case (9b) is felicitous on the grounds that expressions with purely expressive content do not pick out or target certain specific descriptive features (such as sexual identity) and can therefore be felicitously uttered while denying some particular set of descriptive features (such as sexual identity) to its target, the slurring case (11b) is not likewise felicitous. So in this respect the slurring case (11b) is not like the purely expressive case (12b) but is instead rather like the purely descriptive case (10b).

This result is in fact unsurprising since slurs are commonly understood to target those descriptive features typically considered to be associated with members belonging to certain classes; for example, the expression *chink* typically slurs Chinese Americans, the expression *gook* typically slurs Korean Americans, and the expression *nigger* typically slurs African Americans. As Anderson and Lepore (2013) have rightly pointed out in “Slurring Words,” there in fact exist a large variety of slurs “that target groups on the basis of race (‘nigger’), nationality (‘kraut’), religion (‘kike’), gender (‘bitch’), sexual orientation (‘fag’), immigrant status (‘wetback’) and sundry other demo-

graphics” (p. 25). But we have observed that purely expressive expressions like *fucker* do not target group members on the basis of race, nationality, religion, gender, sexual orientation, immigrant status, or other such sundry demographic features. So although it may be acknowledged that purely expressive expressions like *fucker* and *damn* do not differ in their descriptive content,⁸ it seems clear that slurs like *chink* and *whore* are in fact distinguished from one another by virtue of (differences among) their descriptive content.

For our purpose here of better understanding the actual content of various racial and sexual slurs, it may be useful to briefly consider the very different ways in which racial and sexual slurs have actually been used and are commonly understood. Considering the racial slur *nigger*, for instance, Easton (2007) has explained in *A Treatise on the Intellectual Character and Civil and Political Condition of the Colored People of the United States; and the Prejudice Exercised Towards Them* that this slur was understood as “an opprobrious term, employed to impose contempt upon blacks as an inferior race” (p. 41–42). Blassingame (1979) further explains in *The Slave Community* that, “to relieve themselves of the anxiety of thinking about slaves as men [...] whites of all classes came to rely on language (and especially the use of pejoratives like the N word) in the pursuit of such relief” (p. 14). In “The N Word: Its History and Use in the African American Community,” Rahman (2012) further explains that “the racist use of *nigger* criticizes a presumed innate moral and intellectual inferiority of African Americans” (p. 158) and that “*nigger* became a convenient term for indexing the subhuman characteristics being ascribed to African Americans through this ideology” (p. 143). Now considering the sexual slur *slut*, on the other hand, Attwood (2007) has explained that this slur was understood as identifying a “vulgar promiscuous woman who flouts propriety” (p. 233) or “a woman of a low or loose character” (p. 234). In “How the Jilt Triumphed Over the Slut: The Evolution of an Epithet, 1660–1780,” Blackwell (2004) also explains that “The word ‘slut,’ a charge easy to level and hard to disprove, is an ambivalent emblem of women’s perception of their sexuality” (p. 141). So given the very different ways in which the racial slur *nigger* and the sexual slur *slut* have actually been used in race-directed and sex-directed applications, respectively, it seems clear that racial slurs (such as *chink*, *nigger*, and *gook*) and sexual slurs (such as *bitch*, *slut*, and *whore*) are in fact distinguished from one another by virtue of (differences among) their descriptive content. In other words, what makes a racial slur *r* a racial slur is determined by the content or application-conditions of *r* just as what makes a sexual slur *s* a sexual slur is determined by the content or application-conditions of *s*. This point can be clarified with the examples below:

(12a) T is a *whore*, but I deny saying anything about her [*x*]^d.

(13a) T is a *chink*, but I deny saying anything about her [*x*]^d.

(12c) T is a *whore*, but I deny saying anything about her [racial identity].

(13c) T is a *chink*, but I deny saying anything about her [racial identity].*

(12d) T is a *whore*, but I deny saying anything about her [sexual identity].*

(13d) T is a *chink*, but I deny saying anything about her [sexual identity].

Although the sexual case (12a) and the racial case (13a) both involve utterances the felicity of which are blockable by *some* descriptive content, it can be observed from these examples that they are not both blockable by the *same* descriptive content. Namely, that content which blocks the felicity of the sexual slur in (12d) does not block the felicity of the racial slur in (13d), and that content which blocks the felicity of the racial slur in (13c) does not block the felicity of the sexual slur in (12c). Accordingly, since slurs are distinguishable from one another by virtue of their descriptive conditions, it follows that slurs must have descriptive contents that possess sufficient differences among their varieties such that they can be aptly distinguished from one another by competent speakers. Even Hedger (2012) seems implicitly committed to conceding descriptive content to slurs since he seems to find no problem identifying *which slur* is to count as *the relevant S*, “when S is a slur normally used to target blacks” (p. 78). So contrary to the analysis offered by Hedger (2012) it is clear that slurs are not purely expressive at all but instead possess a descriptive aspect also.

The second case Hedger (2012) offered in support of his view that slurs lack descriptive content altogether was where he argued that, “It would be odd to claim that this person [that yells *fucker* in frustration] has described the wrench or the car as being a certain way” (p. 77). But here Hedger (2012) has again taken an analysis of “cuss words” that suggests that “cuss words” fail to describe targets (p. 77) and assumed that from this analysis a conclusion about “slurs” could be straightforwardly drawn, namely, that “slurs” fail to describe targets as being a certain way also. But again what is problematic here is that “cuss words” like *fucker* function in a way that is linguistically quite distinct from “slurs” like *chink* and so Hedger (2012) is not warranted in drawing conclusions about slurs like *chink* from considerations of cuss words like *fucker*. To reinforce this point further still, let us briefly consider which targets might reasonably *take offense to* particular slurs (Croom 2013b). That is, if expressions like *fucker* and *chink* are really expressions of the same type (i.e., purely expressive expressions) as Hedger (2012) suggests, and no one in particular tends to feel especially targeted by an expression like *fucker*, then it should follow that no one in particular tends to feel especially targeted by an expression like *chink* either. But it seems clearly false that no one in particular tends to feel especially targeted

by an expression like *chink* (Leung 2004; Jackson 2005; McLaughlin 2008; Islam 2011; Stamper 2011; Miles 2012; Debucquoy-Dodley 2013). So with respect to this point, the purely expressive account of slurs that Hedger (2012) advocates seems committed to a claim that is empirically false.

Further still, Hedger (2012) also seems committed to the related *normative* commitment that no one in particular *should* feel especially targeted by an expression like *chink*, since the slur “lack[s] descriptive content whatsoever” (p. 77) and is instead purely expressive of the state of the speaker (Potts 2003; Potts & Kawahara 2004; Hedger 2013). As Hedger (2013) further explicates his view in “Meaning and Racial Slurs,” “the same point about [the purely expressive expression *blasted*] could be made about expressions such as ‘ouch’ or about racial slurs. The main point is that they don’t convey any information beyond the attitude which the speaker expresses by using it” (p. 211). So Hedger (2012) seems committed to the claim that, if anyone in particular *were to feel* especially targeted by a particular slurring expression like *chink*, then they would be feeling offended *unreasonably*. For example, if a Chinese American were to feel especially targeted by the slur *chink*, say more so than a Swedish person, then according to the purely expressive view of slurs endorsed by Hedger (2012) that Chinese American must be feeling especially targeted *unreasonably* since a Chinese American *should feel no more targeted by the slur chink than by the purely expressive expressions blasted or ouch* (Hedger 2012, p. 78; Hedger 2013, p. 211). Yet this apparent commitment itself seems unreasonable, as it fails to take seriously, for instance, the history and nature of particularly *race-directed* offense, which has already been well-discussed in prior work (Fredrickson 1971; Blassingame 1979; Bonnell 1998; Sniderman & Piazza 2002; Asim 2007; Smith 2011; Croom 2013a). So when one actually takes into consideration the historical facts regarding particular types of offense, such as documented events of race-directed and sex-directed acts of derogation or subordination, it becomes especially clear that the purely expressive view of slurs proposed by Hedger (2012) suffers from a serious explanatory weakness insofar as it suggests (a) that no one in particular tends to feel especially targeted by slurring expressions like *chink* just as no one in particular tends to feel especially targeted by purely expressive expressions like *fucker*, and (b) that no one in particular *should* feel especially targeted by a particular slurring expression like *chink* since slurs presumably “lack descriptive content whatsoever,” as expressions like *fucker* do, and are instead purely expressive of the state of the speaker (p. 77).

The third case Hedger (2012) offered in support of his purely expressive account of slurs was where he argued that “a person of Swedish decent” still manages to be offended by “a slur normally used to target blacks” (p. 78). The idea here seems to be that, since it is *not only* African Americans

that find the slur *nigger* offensive, but presumably Swedish people and *others also*, then slurs like *nigger* are *generally* offensive expressions with respect to everyone. And since each particular slur is presumably such that that slur is *generally* offensive with respect to everyone, then each slur must be *generally and purely* expressive, lacking sufficient descriptive content that might figure into the felicitous *differential* ascription of *particular* slurs towards *particular* targets in context. As Hedger claims, the sentence *Obama is the first S President of the U.S.*, “when S is a slur normally used to target blacks,” “fails to offer sufficient descriptive content to predicate anything of Obama” (2012, p. 78) and that “Slurs express contempt but don’t say anything about or describe their targets, and thus are composed of purely expressive content” (2013, p. 206).

But there are at least two reasons why the analysis Hedger (2012) offers for this case remain problematic. First, it is important to notice that in this case the real referential work towards the Swedish person is being done by the speaker’s *ostensive act of pointing* rather than their *lexical choice* of the “slur normally used to target blacks” (p. 78). That is to say, Hedger (2012) has failed to isolate *the act of uttering a slur towards a target* from *the act of pointing towards a target* and demonstrate that the target was offended by the *former act* and not the *latter act*. For you might be offended by a stranger pointing their finger at you *regardless of what they say*. Or, you might be offended by a stranger pointing their finger at you while doing something that is *generally* offensive to witnesses (e.g., if they pointed their finger at you while spitting on an honored or cherished text, or while masturbating in public), as if by pointing at you while doing (e.g., saying) something generally offensive they were somehow *ostensibly involving you* in their generally offensive act. So as it stands, Hedger (2012) has not yet sufficiently argued that in this case “a person of Swedish decent” still manages to be *personally* offended by “a *slur* normally used to target blacks” (p. 78, my emphasis), since he has so far failed to properly isolate the act of *slurring* from the act of *pointing* within the larger communicative event under consideration.

A second reason why the analysis Hedger (2012) offers for this case is problematic is that he conflates being the *target* of a potentially offensive act with being the *witness* of a potentially offense act (Croom 2013b). Consider that a Swedish person that is offended by the use of the slur *nigger* can still take offense as a *witness* of this linguistic act while not taking offense as the *target* of this linguistic act. For instance, even if you are not Chinese American, since you are presumably not racist you are still likely to find the slur *chink* offensive *as a witness*. But given whatever racial or sexual identity you happen to have, you are likely to further find some particular slur *particularly offensive as a target*. If you are Chinese American, for

example, you are likely to find the slur *chink* – but not the slur *kraut* – particularly offensive *as a target*. Although the purely expressive account of slurs that Hedger (2012) proposes may be able to account for their *general offensiveness for non-targeted witnesses*, it seems unable to account for how slurs have the capacity for *particularly targeted offensiveness*. For if Hedger were correct in holding that all slurs “lack descriptive content whatsoever” (2012, p. 77), “contain merely expressive content” (2012, p. 78), and function as purely expressive expressions like *ouch* do to convey *no information beyond the subjective state of the speaker* (2013, p. 211), then it would remain ultimately mysterious why in certain contexts a (for instance, racist or in-group) speaker would find the slur *chink* more linguistically apt than the slur *kraut* for targeting Chinese Americans, and why Chinese Americans would presumably feel more directly offended by the slur *chink* than by the slur *kraut*.

In holding that slurs contain purely offensive expressive content, Hedger (2012) not only fails to account for the fact that in certain contexts a speaker would find one slur more linguistically apt than another for use (*lexical aptness*) and that in certain contexts some targets would find one slur more directly offensive than another (*target aptness*), he further fails to account for the fact that the use of a slur doesn’t *always or necessarily* express offense. Recall for instance that in considering the statement *Obama is an S*, when *S* is a slur normally used to target blacks, Hedger (2013) claims that “there is no way to characterize the speaker’s belief content which does not contain an expression of contempt or in a way which is not offensive” (p. 208). Hedger (2013) further asserts that “Slurs are offensive in every use, no matter the context of conversation” (p. 207), that “A slur can’t be uttered without saying something derogatory” (p. 207), and that “the offensiveness of racial slurs should be considered part of their semantic content” (p. 206). Apparently, Hedger (2012, 2013) is held captive by a certain a priori picture of how slurs *must* work in natural language, for he is unwavering in his view that slurs *must* always and necessarily work to express offense.

Yet a commitment to this purely expressive view of slurs that Hedger (2012) proposes leaves the non-derogatory in-group (or re-appropriative) use of slurs appearing paradoxical and counter to “common sense” (p. 83). For if, as Hedger (2012) suggests, slurs *in general* always and necessarily work to express offensive content, it seems paradoxical that slurs *in some particular case* should work in opposition to this and express non-offensive content instead. Unfortunately, the uninformative strategy that Hedger (2012) adopts for dealing with this apparent paradox is to not deal with it at all, but rather to brush it aside as tangential to an adequate analysis of slurs (p. 83; see also Hedger 2013, p. 206). But perhaps Wittgenstein (1953) offers

relevant guidance when he advises in *Philosophical Investigations*: “Don’t think, but look!” (§66). “One cannot guess how a word functions,” Wittgenstein (1953) suggests, instead “One has to look at its use and learn from that” (§340). Often in philosophical or linguistic inquiry, Wittgenstein (1953) further remarks, a “paradox disappears only if we make a radical break with the idea that language always functions in one way, always serves the same purpose” (§304). Concerning the activities we call “games,” for instance, Wittgenstein (1953) asks:

What is common to them all? – Don’t say: “There *must* be something common, or they would not be called ‘games’” – but *look and see* whether there is anything common to all. – For if you look at them you will not see something that is common to *all*, but similarities, relationships, and a whole series of them at that. (§66)

By following Wittgenstein (1953) and *looking to see and listening to* how slurs are actually used in natural language discourse, it becomes clear that accounting for the fact that slurs can be felicitously used in a way that is non-offensive is crucially important for an explanatorily adequate account of slurs, since there is now substantive empirical evidence showing that slurs are not always or exclusively used to derogate.

For example, in a recent article published on *CBS Sports*, Wilson (2013) reports on the longtime friendship of fellow Lions teammates Tony Schefler and Louis Delmas and points out that between the two of them “racial slurs are considered a term of endearment” (see also Foster 2013; Smith 2013). Scholars have also noted that the racial slur *nigger* has been used non-pejoratively since at least the early 1800s (Dillard 1977; Stuckey 1994; Spears 1998; Jacobs 2001; Wilson 2002; Rahman 2012), and that slurs are in fact frequently picked up and reappropriated by the very in-group members that the slur was originally intended to target, presumably as a means for like speakers to strengthen in-group solidarity or to diminish what derogatory force the slur had previously carried (Kennedy 2002; Galinsky, Hugenberg, Groom, & Bodenhausen 2003; Brontsema 2004; Croom 2010; Croom 2011; Croom 2012; Croom 2013a; Croom 2013b; Galinsky, Wang, Whitson, Anicich, Hugenberg & Bodenhausen in press). This reappropriative or non-derogatory in-group use of slurs is a bone fide and widespread use of slurs that communicates positive, non-pejorative content or meaning when employed between in-group speakers that differs markedly from the “Pejorative meanings that have historically come from outside the community” (Rahman 2012, p. 141). As Croom (2013) has suggested in “How to Do Things with Slurs,” within the context of certain in-group speakers a slur can often be used as a *norm reversed variant* of the original paradigmatic derogatory use and can thus be understood between in-group speakers as

non-derogatory. In “The Co-Construction of Whiteness in an MC Battle,” Cutler (2007) also explains that, within hip-hop culture especially, “Whiteness is still marked against a backdrop of normative Blackness” so that within such a cultural context an “alternative social reality [exists] in which Blackness is normative and Whiteness is marked” (p. 10–11; for reasons motivating norm reversal see discussion in Croom 2013a, p. 190–194; Anderson 1999, p. 36, 112, 234). Considering the non-derogatory use of the racial slur *nigger*, for instance, the influential hip-hop lyricist Talib Kweli has reported that, “Our community has been using the word and trying to redefine the context of it for a long time” and “the fact of the matter is that there’s a large segment of black people who grew up hearing the word intended as nothing but love” (quoted in Echegoyen 2006). In *Nigger: The Strange Career of a Troublesome Word*, Kennedy (2002) also discusses how many African Americans continue to non-offensively use the slur “openly and frequently in conversations with one another” (p. 37). Spears (1998) likewise claims in “African-American Language Use: Ideology and So-Called Obscenity,” that “the great majority of African Americans, male and female, use [the] N [word] when among other African Americans” non-offensively (p. 239). Henry Louis Gates, Jr., director of the W.E.B. Du Bois Institute for African American Research at Harvard University, also claims that he is not at all offended by the use of the slur in an in-group context among African Americans (Gates 2009). Russell Simmons, the founder of Def Jam Records, further explains that:

When we say ‘nigger’ now, it’s very positive. Now all white kids who buy into hip-hop culture call each other ‘nigger’ because they have no history with the word other than something positive [...] When black kids call each other ‘a real nigger’ or ‘my nigger,’ it means you walk a certain way [...] have your own culture that you invent so you don’t have to buy into the US culture that you’re not really a part of. It means we’re special. We have our own language. (quoted in Jackson 2005)

Yet this non-derogatory use of slurs is clearly not restricted to racial slurs alone but extends to slurs of other varieties also, such as sexual slurs. For instance, sexual slurs like *queer* and *bitch* have also been popularly re-appropriated for in-group use (Kleinman, Ezzell & Frost 2009; Schillinger 2010; Angyal 2011). Just as it has been pointed out before that speakers often exchange race-pertaining terms with each other, “not as a means to derogatively characterize each other, but as a means for naming each other as fellow members belonging to the same racial group” (Croom 2008, p. 45, fn. 5; p. 43–44), Stamper (2011) has likewise discussed how “the word “queer” [is] as an example of a[nother] word that was once strictly pejorative but is now a common sexual identifier used [non-offensively] by the LGBT

community.” The representatives of SlutWalk, an international movement that has received widespread media coverage, expressed their view on slurs over a radio broadcast in the following way:

One of the most effective ways to fight hate is to disarm the derogatory terms employed by haters, embracing them and giving them positive connotations. This also serves to provide a sex-positive term for women (and men), few or none of which currently exist, and allows sluts (individuals of any gender who have and enjoy frequent consensual sex, especially with multiple partners) to identify as part of a cohesive group for political representation. We feel that offering a place for women who lead such a lifestyle to self-identify as sluts does not disrespect them – indeed, the disrespecting is done by the rapists, the victim blamers who excuse the rape, and the slut shamers who say or imply they are disgracing, degrading, and dishonoring themselves. (Murray, Sacks & Schimmel 2011)

In an article to appear in *Psychological Science*, which seems relevant to our discussion here, Galinsky and colleagues (in press) conducted ten empirical studies on re-appropriation to test its potential effects on speakers and listeners empirically. The basic result from their ten studies was that they found that a reciprocal relationship holds between (a) the feeling of power, and (b) self-labeling with a slur such as *queer* or *bitch* (p. 1). As Galinsky and colleagues (in press) explain their results:

Self-labelers felt more powerful after self-labeling and observers perceived self-labelers and their group as more powerful. Finally, the label was evaluated less negatively after self-labeling and this stigma attenuation was mediated by perceived power. Importantly, these effects only occurred for derogatory terms (e.g., queer, bitch) but not for descriptive (e.g., LGBT, woman) or majority group labels (e.g., straight). These results suggest that self-labeling with a derogatory label can weaken its stigmatizing force. (Galinsky, Wang, Whitson, Anicich, Hugenberg & Bodenhausen in press, p. 1)

In another empirical study conducted by Associated Press-MTV involving 1,355 participants, it was also found that 54% of respondents “think it’s OK to use them [slurs] within their own circle of friends” and that in such contexts the slur is non-offensive (Cass & Agiesta 2011; Greene 2011). As one of the subjects in another empirical study conducted by Rahman (2012) explains, “You see, the people who say they’re offended are the older adults. Young kids don’t understand what the big deal is about the word. They know it’s about black people and slavery, but they’re like ‘that’s over’” (p. 161). So we have now seen that recent empirical studies in fact substantiate other independent reports of in-group speakers claiming to use slurs non-

offensively, and thus provide a serious challenge to the purely expressive account of slurs proposed by Hedger (2012) which argues a priori that “Slurs are offensive in every use, no matter the context of conversation” (p. 207).

Yet another problem with the analysis presented by Hedger (2012) in “The Semantics of Racial Slurs” concerns his suggestion that slurs may function as reverse or anti-honorifics (p. 78–79). The problem here lies in his assumption that he can legitimately commit to both (a) the claim that slurs have purely expressive content, and (b) the claim that slurs function as (anti-) honorifics. For there is reason to doubt that one can legitimately maintain this joint commitment, for as McCready (2010) has already explained in “Varieties of Conventional Implicature,” “honorifics like *irassharu* are instances of mixed content” rather than purely expressive content since they “simultaneously honor some individual and predicate something of her” (p. 17). Consequently, a commitment to (b) seems incompatible with a commitment to (a), and thus in suggesting that slurs may function as anti-honorifics Hedger (2012) seems to at least implicitly go against the grain of his purely expressive view of slurs by suggesting that slurs, just like honorifics such as *irassharu*, involve mixed rather than purely expressive content.

As a final point of criticism, the purely expressive analysis of slurs offered by Hedger (2012) suffers from the serious problem of failing to observe, take into consideration, and discuss actual concrete examples of slurs being used in natural language discourse. It seems plausible that many of the weaknesses in the analysis Hedger (2012) offers of slurs are at least partly due to the fact that he continually ignores inspecting concrete examples of slurs as they are actually used in natural language and simply identifies all instances with the blanket label *S* (p. 74, 78), which has evidently resulted in his weakened ability to notice distinctions between different slurs and his failure to connect theorizing about slurs with empirical data from an enlarged sample of competent speakers. Hedger (2012) says that he “believe[s], as Wittgenstein did, that common sense should not be treated like an umbrella, but should be carried into the room as a guiding principle when we philosophize” (p. 83). But perhaps Hedger (2012) should also believe, as Wittgenstein (1953) did, that “One cannot guess how a word functions. One has to *look at* its use and learn from that” (§340).

4. Conclusion

To review, our discussion in this article has proceeded as follows. Section 1 provided an introduction and section 2 reviewed the purely expressive approach to slurs recently proposed by Hedger (2012) along with the three key cases he asked us to consider in support of his claim that slurs are expressions with purely expressive content: (1) where Hedger (2012) found

different translations for English “cuss words” in Spanish, (2) where “It would be odd to claim that this person [that yells *fucker* in frustration] has described the wrench or the car as being a certain way” (p. 77), and (3) where “a person of Swedish decent” still manages to be offended by “a slur normally used to target blacks” (p. 78). We critically evaluated these cases in section 3, finding that all of the arguments presented by Hedger (2012) are problematic and that the case for a purely expressive account of slurs remains weak.

To be clear, this article has shown that the purely expressive analysis of slurs presented in “The Semantics of Racial Slurs” by Hedger (2012) ultimately fails in at least the following 13 ways: (1) it illegitimately draws conclusions about slurs (e.g., *chink*) from analyses of cuss words (e.g., *fuck*); (2) it fails to consider the different ways in which different (e.g., racial and sexual) slurs have conventionally been used (e.g., in race-directed and sex-directed acts, respectively) and are commonly understood; (3) it fails to account for the fact that slurs are differentially applied towards targets with different descriptive features; (4) it falsely suggests that no one in particular tends to feel particularly targeted by particular slurs; (5) it wrongly suggests that if anyone in particular were to feel especially targeted by a particular slurring expression then they would be feeling offended unreasonably; (6) it fails to properly isolate the act of slurring from the act of pointing within the larger communicative event under consideration; (7) it conflates being the target of a potentially offensive act with being the witness of a potentially offensive act; (8) it fails to account for how slurs have the capacity for particularly targeted offensiveness; (9) it fails to account for both lexical aptness and target aptness; (10) it fails to account for the empirical fact that slurs can be used non-offensively; (11) it illegitimately suggests that slurs have purely expressive rather than mixed content while simultaneously suggesting that slurs function as honorifics, despite the fact that “honorifics like *irassharu* are instances of mixed content” in that they “simultaneously honor some individual and predicate something of her” (McCready 2010, p. 17); (12) it fails to consider concrete examples of slurs as they are actually used in natural language and simply identifies all instances of slurs with the blanket label S, resulting, for instance, in a weakened ability to notice distinctions between different types of slurs; (13) it does not take into consideration the linguistic behavior and explicit reports of robust populations of fully competent (in-group, typically minority) speakers, prejudging in advance that only self-confirming evidence should be taken seriously. In clearly showing that the purely expressive analysis of slurs that Hedger (2012) offers is inadequate in at least these 13 ways, it also becomes clear that an adequate account of slurs will ultimately involve not only an expressive component but a descriptive component also. In other words, slurs are best

accounted for by a mixed or hybrid approach, as I have further outlined in other recent work.

NOTES

1. Hedger (2012) cites Kaplan's unpublished manuscript from (2004), but since it has been available since at least (1999) I here cite the earlier version.

2. It is interesting to note that, although Hedger (2012, 2013) does not cite the earlier work on slurs by Croom (2011), it is clear that most of the correct points made by Hedger (2012) and Hedger (2013) were already previously discussed in sections 1–4 in Croom (2011) and section 5 in Croom (2011), respectively. It is not the main aim of the present work to explicate these points of comparison, but the reader can easily observe these points of comparison by consulting Croom (2011, 2013) and Hedger (2012, 2013).

3. Example (1) here is identified as example (3) in Hedger 2012, p. 75, but has been renumbered to avoid confusing the reader with an incoherent numbering method for the multiple examples provided throughout this article.

4. Example (2) here is identified as example (5) in Hedger 2012, p. 76.

5. I am here granting for the sake of argument Hedger's (2012) use of the expression *intelligent* as an apt example of an expression with purely descriptive content, but it is perhaps worth further exploring on a separate occasion whether the expression *intelligent* may also be expressive of an attitude towards the target of predication.

6. See criticism 6 in the present article for an important discussion about the speaker *pointing* in this case. I reserve the discussion now for the sake of suspense.

7. Example (5) here is identified as example (17) in Hedger 2012, p. 78.

8. This is due to the fact that the expressions *fucker* and *damn* are commonly assumed to lack descriptive content altogether (Potts 2005; Potts 2007).

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