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Slurs and register: A case study in meaning pluralism

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Abstract

Most theories of slurs fall into two families: Those which understand slurring terms to involve special descriptive/informational content (however conveyed), and those which understand them to encode special emotive/expressive content. Both offer essential insights, but part of what sets slurs apart is use-theoretic content. Slurring words belong at the intersection of categories in a sociolinguistic register taxonomy, one that usually includes [+slang, +vulgar] and always includes [-polite, +derogatory]. What distinguishes "Chinese" from "chink," for example, is neither a peculiar sort of descriptive nor emotional content, but the fact that "chink" is lexically marked as belonging to different registers. Moreover, such facts contribute to slurring being ethically unacceptable.

KEYWORDS
meaning pluralism, pragmatics, semantics, slurs, sociolinguistic register, use-theoretic meanings

Words, though abstract, are human artifacts that in addition to phonological, grammatical, and semantic structure have all sorts of other properties. They have etymology, history, regional or foreign provenance, field restrictions (anatomical, botanical, etc.), currency (obsolescence, rarity, etc.), tone (archaic, humorous, etc.), discourse level (slang, formal, etc.), collocational associations (there are other words whose company they typically keep), proscriptions (word taboos), offensiveness levels, degrees of insultingness, and unsavoury associations. Some of them are no more neutral and inoffensive than a concealed switchblade. That is the key to the power of both slurs and curses (Pullum, 2018, §8).

1 | INTRODUCTION: AIMS AND A "FIRST PASS"

We have twin aims. A modest one is to introduce a promising account of the meaning of slurs.[1] It is promising both in terms of descriptive adequacy and insight into why slurring is ethically wrong. All hands agree that there is typically something ethically unacceptable about using slurs; we present a novel account of the source. More ambitiously, we aim to illustrate the attractions of pluralism about linguistic meaning.

The point is not to offer an exhaustive defense. In particular, we will not undertake a refutation of other approaches to slurs: Insofar as we discuss alternatives, it is to give credit where due, and to contrast our position. Even the "introducing" element carries a caveat: Being pluralistic, our view borrows from, or at least coincides with, aspects of existing positions. So far as we know, however, the resulting synthesis is original.

By way of a "first pass," we begin with examples of slurring words:

1. (a) chink

   (b) dyke

   (c) kike

   (d) kraut

   (e) proddie

   (f) retard

   (g) spic

   (h) wop

There are two dominant approaches to such words. One takes them to convey, by whatever means, some linguistically and ethically puzzling message. The other takes them to encode not propositional content, but something emotive.[2] Both have something right. There is a place in semantics and philosophy of language generally for meanings understood as descriptive/informational—whether about worldly things and their properties, social events, abstract mathematical facts, or what have you. There is also a place for meanings understood as ways to express and inculcate feelings, pro-attitudes, and other "non-cognitive" mental states. But, both in general and specifically with respect to the meaning of slurs, a third element is required.

A far-from-dominant alternative, put very roughly for now, is that (part of) giving the meaning of an expression or construction is (sometimes) to specify the socio-cultural action one performs with it. Linguistico-philosophical ideology aside, such use-theoretic meaning would be recognized in (2a–c) and (3a–c):

2. (a) Congrats!

   (b) Hello!

   (c) Welcome!

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[1] It is an unfortunate feature of our project that we must mention a host of rude and offensive words, including ethnic, racial and religious slurs. Where possible, we have chosen the less offensive ones, but even these are jarring expressions that many reasonable people would prefer, no matter the context, not to encounter. We apologize in advance for forcing readers to do so.

[2] The literature on slurs is vast. Painting with broad strokes, a representative sampling of the first family includes Hom (2008, 2010, 2012), Hom and May (2013, 2018), and Williamson (2009); the second includes Jeshion (2013a), Saka (2007), Schlenker (2007) and Whiting (2013).

3. (a) Gesundheit!

    (b) Shush!

    (c) There, there!

We maintain that it also shows up in sociolinguistic registers, illustrated by the differences among the terms in (4):

4. (a) poop

    (b) shit

    (c) feces

    (d) excrement

Note also in (5) three variants on the second person singular pronoun in Spanish, running from the most respect-oriented to the most informal[3]:

5. (a) usted

    (b) tú

    (c) vos

We will apply register differences of the sort found in (4) and (5) to slurring words. In particular, (1a–h) are usually lexically marked, in the public language, as slang and vulgar, and always marked as impolite and derogatory—so that, for example, what distinguishes "chink" from "Chinese" is this, rather than a difference in reference or sense, or in what emotions a user of "chink" is expressing.

2 | PART ONE: ELEMENTS OF THE VIEW

2.1 | Slurs

What exactly do we mean by "slurs"? We are, as per recent usage in the literature, using it to stand for natural language expressions. In common parlance, "He slurred me" is sometimes used in a way comparable to "He slandered me." Our use departs doubly from this colloquial one. For us, a slur will be a *word or phrase* which typically stands for *what is an out-group vis-à-vis the larger, dominant community, which is marginalized and oppressed.*

That "typically" is justified by seeming exceptions. Exceptions to the marginalized-condition include Spanish "gringo" and "yanqui" for Americans, and English "boche," "fritz," "hun," and "kraut" for Germans. These targets are, if anything, would-be oppressors. (One might think of these as "retaliation slurs," a derivative sub-kind.) An interesting exception to the stands-for condition, drawn to our attention by Michael Martin, are words *treated* as referring, but where there is no worldly referent. Martin's example is "pleb," which given our 21st-century class system may well

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[3] Pronouns of this sort are, of course, familiar from numerous languages: French's "tu"/"vous," German's "du'/"Sie," Italian's "tu"/"lei," Russian's "ty'/ "vy." As a by-the-way, register is at least reminiscent of Frege's (1892, p. 61) and (1918, p. 295) notion of coloring/shading/tone, where expressions such as "dog"/"cur" or "horse"/"steed" may fail of intuitive synonymy without ceasing to be referentially equivalent, and even while expressing the same sense.

lack a determinate referent but is definitely a slur in the United Kingdom; another might be "crone" for witches. What is more, if radical anti-realists about race are correct—that is, racial categories are pernicious myths with no worldly correlates—then "chink" and such are exceptions too.

These pejorative epithets have notorious facets. We begin with ethical/social ones. As Hom (2008, p. 427), Anderson and Lepore (2013a, 2013b) and others have stressed, the use of slurring words is **taboo**. More than "to be avoided in polite company," the use of certain ones is full-on **prohibited** (Hom, 2010, p. 165). Another hallmark is that the resulting derogation is not merely towards the particular person or persons that the speaker may have in mind. It **extends to the entire group** which the slur picks out. Thus, if Donnie refers to a woman as "That spic Justina," she is demeaned—but so are Hispanics generally.

It is also difficult for the linguistic or worldly context to erase the derogation/offense. In particular, a speaker's lack of offensive intent is not sufficient. This is often called **derogatory autonomy**.[4] Nor is derogation cancelled by embedding: For example, in the antecedent of a conditional or under negation. This related feature has been termed **non-displaceability**.[5] Someone who says, for example, "If there are chinks in Toronto my brother will be upset" or "There aren't any chinks in Toronto" is still slurring the Chinese. The same holds for embedding under a propositional attitude or discourse-reporting verb: "My brother thinks that there are chinks in Toronto" or "My brother asked whether there are chinks in Toronto" are both as offensive as (6):

6. There are chinks in Toronto

As a result of being taboo, group-insulting, and hard-to-cancel, slurring words are, as Hornsby (2001, p. 129) insightfully noted very early on, "**useless**" for those who wish to be enlightened, fair-minded, and so forth. Some slurs are even useless when reporting speech directly: Pronouncing them can give offense. "Cunt" as a term for women in English-speaking North America, and "nigger" worldwide, are notorious cases in point. (In light of this, where appropriate we will refer to these hereafter as "the C-word" and "the N-word.") As Hom rightly notes:

> Uses of [slurring and other offensive] epithets are subject to strict social constraints, if not outright forbidden. There seem to be very rare instances for the appropriate use of epithets (for example, under explicit quotation in the courtroom, in a discussion about language and the media, appropriated uses among members of the target class). Even when a speaker intends a benign use, the result is often an unintended violation of strict speech codes, especially in cases of public speech. For many, the taboo surrounding epithets is not limited to their direct use, but covers their occurrence within quotation, fiction, intensional contexts, questions, negations, conditional antecedents, and even extends to phonologically similar, but semantically distinct, expressions (Hom, 2008, p. 427).

All of this granted, and as Hom suggests, the offense can sometimes be mitigated or even erased. Consider a young child or recent immigrant who uses "retard" without having mastered its standing meaning in North American English. Add that the speaker would absolutely have avoided that term

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[4] This is the term used in Hom (2008, p. 426) and Jeshion (2013a, p. 233). Bolinger (2015, p. 1) calls it "offensive autonomy."

[5] Hom (2010, p. 168), Potts (2007, p. 166) and Schlenker (2007, p. 238) use this term, Croom (2011, p. 345) labels the phenomenon "scopelessness," while Bolinger (2015, p. 1) writes of "embedding failure."

if they had known it was pejorative, and that their ignorance is non-negligent. Though it is not wholly erased, it is clear that the violation is reduced. (Unlike its use by an adult American politician, who even if by some miracle did not know that "retard" was insulting, is expected to.) A second kind of offense-cancellation is much more notorious. When a group collectively chooses to apply the word to themselves, this may fully overcome the "uselessness." Non-derogatory **re-appropriated** uses of the N-word by members of the black community directed at fellow members are common-place, for example. Addressing another important case, Mark Richard notes:

> Slurs can be used without displaying contempt or causing hurt. This happens, for example, when a slur is appropriated by its targets: it is an insult to no one, save perhaps the homophobe, for gay people to call themselves queer (Richard, 2008, p. 12).[6]

Turning to notorious linguistic facets of slurs, they almost always have non-derogatory correlates which (seemingly) stand for the very same group. As Hornsby (2001) put it, "for each such word, there is, or at least perfectly well could be, another that applies to the same people but whose use does not convey these things—there is, that is, a neutral counterpart" (p. 129; see also Whiting, 2013, p. 364).[7] As a result, a slurring word and its **neutral counterpart** at least seem to contribute the same message-type content to complete sentences: For example, though the point has been con-tested, it is initially plausible that any possible world at which "There are Chinese in Toronto" holds is *ipso facto* a world at which (6) holds and vice versa. Unquestionably, it is difficult to paraphrase any alleged difference in terms of description/information: If real at all, it is **descriptively ineffable**. Thus, as Schlenker (2007, p. 239) points out, speakers are never fully satisfied when one paraphrases "slurring contents" with descriptive terminology. For instance, (7) seems ill-suited to translate (6):

7.   There are Chinese in Toronto and I despise the Chinese

Nonetheless, someone who took "Chinese" and "chink" to be interchangeable content-wise (e.g., when translating English or writing a children's book) would make a serious mistake. Indeed, what makes the topic of slurs of such great interest to semanticists and philosophers of language is this pre-theoretical difference in meaning.

Related to the (seeming) non-informational difference is a puzzle about **non-redundancy** (Potts, 2007, p. 166, and Schlenker, 2007, p. 239 call it "repeatability.") If (6) were synonymous with (7), then "There are chinks in Toronto and I despise the Chinese" should be semantically anomalous. Its content would include *that I despise the Chinese* twice over: Its first conjunct would contribute it as an analytic entailment, and then its second conjunct would repeat this overtly. But, and this is the datum, we do not hear "There are chinks in Toronto and I despise the Chinese" as bizarrely

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[6] For additional discussion see Hom (2008, p. 428), Jeshion (2013a, p. 233) and Kennedy (2002). An important distinction between normalizing and out-group slurs is addressed by Diaz-Legaspe (2018).

[7] Consider, by way of contrast, "pedophile,", "torturer," and "traitor." These are words and phrases which we apply to shunned out-groups, and which are likely to be insulting. Still, they are not slurring expressions in our sense because there really is something blameworthy about belonging to such groups—whereas, the prejudices of bigots notwithstanding, there is absolutely nothing despicable about being, say, Chinese, Hispanic, Jewish or Protestant. (See also Jeshion, 2013b, p. 325ff.) Potential exceptions to the neutral-counterpart generalization arise with blameless groups who are nonetheless so widely and deeply reviled that any word for them quickly develops negative connotations. For discussion of this "euphemism treadmill," as he terms it, see Pinker (1994a); it builds on ideas from Pinker (1994b). Both observations will re-emerge below.

redundant. (The phenomenon arises, of course, whatever one takes the "extra" propositional content of "chink" to be.)

A final notorious facet is **variation**. English, for example, has a surfeit of slurring words for ethnic and racial groups; Spanish has comparatively few of those, but contains numerous ones for what are considered sexually deviant groups; and contemporary Mandarin contains slurs specific to the social classes of Communist China, and for the general category of non-Chinese foreigner. There is also variation in degree of offensiveness: A single tongue can contain numerous slurs for the same targeted group, but which are more or less offensive. As Jeshion (2013a) puts the point, though without endorsing it, slurs:

> [A]re said to possess derogatory variation, to vary in their degree of offensiveness. The N-word is said to be more offensive than 'chink', as well as 'spook' and 'jigaboo', terms used for the same socially relevant group. 'Kike', 'yid', and 'hymie' are said to differ in their offensive intensity (Jeshion, 2013a, p. 233).[8]

2.2 | Use-theoretic meanings

Continuing to explicate the key elements of our view, we turn to meaning pluralism, understood as including use-theoretic meanings.

Pursuing the *via negativa*, use-theoretic meaning is to be contrasted with meaning understood as wholly a matter of externalizing mental states. Linguistic interaction is not always and essentially a matter of speaker S attempting to voice something psychological, typically aiming to modify inner mental states of some interlocutor. It leaves the error intact to allow that what S expresses may be neither a belief nor a bit of knowledge, but rather a desire, a feeling, and so forth. What is wrongheaded is deeper, according to the use theorist: We need to posit linguistic contents which simply are not in that mentalistic line of work. As Austin (1962) stressed, at least sometimes the speaker S simply performs a socio-cultural action by producing words, often in collaboration with a hearer H.

As examples of not-externalizing-but-acting, recall (2) and (3):

2. (a) Congrats!
   (b) Hello!
   (c) Welcome!

3. (a) Gesundheit!
   (b) Shush!
   (c) There, there!

"Hello!" is not a way of making public a belief, nor is "Gesundheit!" Their contents not being truth-evaluable, they are not the sort of things which can be believed. Neither do they correspond to some peculiar, highly abstract and addressee-directed update rule. Instead, maintains the use theorist, to

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[8] Other authors who have discussed such within-a-language variation are Anderson and Lepore (2013a, p. 350), Bolinger (2015, p. 1) and Hom (2008, p. 426). Note a connection with propositional ineffability: The theorist who would treat slurring words in terms of sense must find different ones for "kike," "yid," and "hymie."

give the meaning of "Hello" is simply to say: *It is the English expression used for greeting.* And the English (3a), adapted long ago from German, has its meaning captured by: *It is the expression to be used when someone else sneezes.* (Some tongue-in-cheek evidence: If a non-native speaker asked what "Gesundheit" meant in English, one should respond with this very simple rule, not with a lesson in dynamic logic.) Undoubtedly, an utterance of (2b)/(3a) can be motivated by beliefs, or create new ones in the hearer. The bone of contention is whether such potential belief-involving causes/effects are built into, let alone exhaust, their linguistic meaning. Turning to the emotive, "Congrats!" is not a way of placing one's positive emotions or feelings on display, nor is "There, there!" a way of voicing sympathetic sadness. Rather, these are linguistic tools for performing the actions of congratulating and comforting respectively. Again, undoubtedly there are emotions which cause such speech, and there will frequently be an emotional effect on the addressee: Typically, that is *why* one congratulates and comforts. Nonetheless, and tongue-in-cheek once more, to give the meaning of (2a)/(3c) does not require a lesson in comparative moral psychology. The connection between content and these mental happenings is far less direct. (Compare: One may say "It's raining yet again" because of feeling glum, but the sentence does not encode such reasons for speaking.)

Still pursuing the *via negativa*, though there is an insight behind the slogan "Meaning is use," we do not endorse a Wittgenstein-style hostility to traditional meaning theories. We are not urging: "Stop studying so-called meaning systematically and instead describe in-context use." Nor do we intend, as per some use-theoretic traditions, to exclude the mental from the theory of meaning. Relatedly, our position is not that linguistic meaning is exhausted by the use-theoretic, at least not in the general case. (Examples (2a–c) and (3a–c) are outliers in this respect.) We embrace complex compositional rules for deriving the content of slur-containing sentences.

We equally do not interpret the slogan such that the theorist should provide an exhaustive catalogue of how an expression has in fact been used, and maybe even of all its potential future uses. That is obviously intractable. Besides, actual usage being an interaction effect, and words being deployed in heterodox ways, an exhaustive catalogue would not give proper insight into literal meaning. If giving meaning involves "describing how a linguistic expression is used," does that amount to capturing brute statistical patterns? Again, no. Though there is a crucial evidential relationship between projectible corpus patterns and use-theoretic meaning, there is additionally a teleological, normative element to the latter.

Turning to what we *do* have in mind, what is sought is a description of the function or job of the word, phrase, sentence or grammatical construction—that is, how the term is supposed to be used according to the shared linguistic conventions (Stainton, 2016). A familiar tool metaphor is apt. Just as a hammer is a tool for driving nails into solid surfaces, "Hello!" is a conventional job-specific "vocal implement for greeting." (This is, partially, what underwrites the statistical patterns in actual talk.)

This notion of conventional function permits non-literal utterances even in the case of use-theoretic contents. They depart from how the expressions is to be used. A hammer can be used in ways which flout its function: Throwing it at an intruder, framing it and hanging it on a wall as "found art." So too a word. For instance, though the use theorist will cash out the meaning of "Gesundheit" in terms of the action that speakers are supposed to carry out, there is room for convention-flouting instances: For example, as a one-off to frighten a dog, or to poke fun at a colleague's absurd statement by pretending that it was merely a sudden involuntary expulsion of air.

We now contrast two sub-varieties of use-theoretic meaning. The more familiar one involves pairing a formative with a type of illocutionary action: Giving a rule regarding (i) which type of action is performed, and (ii) what felicity-type conditions must be in place. Examples we are inclined

to treat this way include (2a–c), Austin-style explicit performative sentences such as "I now pronounce you husband and wife" and "I divorce you, I divorce you, I divorce you," and the sentential moods (e.g., declarative, imperative, interrogative).[9] The other sub-variety requires specifying only felicity-type conditions—there is no illocutionary act in play. Examples we would tentatively place in this category include (3a–c) and also "Bye!," "Go Leafs go!" and "Fuck off!" That little word "hereby" provides a rough-and-ready test for distinguishing. Where there is an illocutionary act, ceteris paribus it may be executed using an explicit performative containing "hereby": One can say, for example, "I hereby congratulate you," "I hereby greet you," and "I hereby welcome you to my home." Where there is no such full-blown speech act, there can of course be no explicit "hereby"-sentence for doing "it." Thus, for example, there is no straightforward explicit performative corresponding to "Fuck off!," "Gesundheit!," or "Shush!" Importantly, in *both* sub-varieties it remains appropriate to speak of "what the expression is conventionally used for": Use-theoretic meaning appears in each.

Further dividing the taxonomy, consider two sub-classes within the non-illocutionary family. There are particular ad hoc expressions. Such are the cases we have encountered so far: Special-purpose terms like "Bye!," "Fuck off!," "Gesundheit!" and "There, there!." But there exist classes of words such that they are only appropriate in conversational situations so-and-so. This takes us to sociolinguistic register.

2.3 | Register

We will explain register in three steps: Parallels with metadata; a tentative feature-geometry for registered lexical items; and three clarifications.

The term "metadata," made familiar in linguistics by Geoffrey Nunberg and Geoffrey Pullum, merits elucidation. The shortest possible definition is "data about data." This is, of course, a wide category. Our specific interest is metadata regarding content-related aspects of words—not specifying a definition but listing facts like collocation proclivities and origin. Granted, that it co-occurs regularly with "effect" and "in my stomach" is orthogonal to the necessary and sufficient conditions for being a satisfier of "butterfly." Granted, metadata about "emesis" to the effect that it derives from Greek, and that "blackguard" is antiquated and nearly obsolete, is not part of their definitions. And yet, speakers may readily take advantage of such knowledge to achieve meaning-effects: For example, reporting a pompous and pedantic colleague's claim, but mockingly substituting for his flatfooted wording antiquated, low-frequency terms of Greek origin.

Though the technical term "register" is equivocal, our usage ties it to metadata of the latter sort.[10] In developing our favored notion, we borrow freely from sociolinguistics and Functional Linguistics, especially in the tradition of Michael Halliday. (See especially Gregory, 1967, 2001; Halliday, 1973; and Halliday & Matthiessen, 2004. Our position is also influenced by certain insights in Caldwell, 2018.) The fundamental idea is: To locate a word in a register category is to specify the contexts for which it is socio-culturally appropriate. This involves contrasting it with expressions in a system of

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[9] For an illocutionary treatment of the meaning of the (matrix) interrogative mood—as opposed to a descriptive/informational treatment in terms of sets of propositions—see Stainton (1999). The key idea is that this mood encodes, in every sentence in the class, *to-be-used-for-asking*.

[10] Mark Jary reminded us of another usage of "register" in sociolinguistics which may latterly prove useful in understanding slurs. "Register," so used, is a word for micro-dialects, also called "varieties": For example, the grammatical constructions and lexis specific to English-speaking police officers, sports broadcasters, video gamers, and so on (cf. Gregory, 1967, 2001.) Jary's promising idea, reminiscent of Nunberg (2018), is that slurring words are marked as belonging to a micro-dialect of (something like) a bigoted community of speakers.

terms which may co-designate but are suitable for other discourse genres. Because register-features are shared by classes of expressions, we indicate them using a feature geometry. Comparable to a phoneme, the register of a particular word is then a matter of the intersection of its register-features. Recall (4a), "poop." Just as "the p-sound" is marked with the features [+anterior, +coronal, +labial] among others, (4a) is similarly marked with [+child-oriented, -formal, -vulgar].

Such talk of "features" can mislead. It suggests binary polarity. That is insufficient for a descriptively adequate theory of register. For instance, one might wish to contrast "poop" as [+child-oriented] to "crap" as [-child-oriented] versus "shit" as [--child-oriented]. Again, Spanish "usted" is adequate for contexts that require respectful address, while "tú" is to be used when conversing with social equals or those lower in the hierarchy. The latter pronoun would thus be marked as [-formal, -respectful] while "usted" would be [+formal, +respectful]. "Vos," however, is even less formal and deferential—this too is a matter of register. What is more, many terms are unmarked with respect to, say, [polite]. Take "elm" or "Montevideo": Instead of lying on either side of a binary divide, they are neutral, being neither [-polite] nor [+polite].

Despite the affinities between metadata generally and register, two contrasts merit underscoring. Register, we hold, always falls within autonomous knowledge of language. In contrast, that "like" is now a very high-frequency word among young people is metadata not of that sort: That is, not part of "linguistic competence." And register-features, in our sense, mark something normative. They specify how the term is appropriately used—metaphorically, what discursive situations a word is "designed for."

As a final step in explicating sociolinguistic register, three clarifications are in order about "appropriateness to a discourse context."

Our notion of conversational context differs from a narrow notion familiar from formal semantics. Specifically, Kaplan's (1989) "context of utterance" consists in a limited n-tuple of comparatively objective parameters: Speaker, addressee, place and time of utterance, and so forth. Our notion tracks "context" in a much wider sense. In the broadly Hallidayan tradition, it would include:

- *Topic area* (called "field" in Systemic Functional circles): For example, technical, scientific, medical, nautical, legal, military.
- *Communicative medium* ("mode"): For example, journal article, e-mail, text message, classroom lecture, barroom chat.
- *Participants' social relations* ("tenor"): For example, degree of formality, social hierarchy, age or sophistication of the interlocutor.

Regarding "appropriateness," a first point is this: That "usted" is appropriate for respect-worthy contexts does not mean that it must occur there and only there. A speaker can choose to utter "usted" in socially impermissible contexts to achieve some communicative effect: For example, in a heated argument with an old friend who would ordinarily be called "tú." (In this regard, register for linguistic expressions may be compared to dress codes. Socio-cultural convention dictates that it is inappropriate to attend a university lecture in a bathing suit, or sporting jeans at an Embassy dinner party. And yet, a protester could appear dressed in those ways to make a point.) Second, that a term is "appropriate" in the sense at play is somewhat orthogonal to normative ethics. Anticipating, talk of "when a slur should be used" seems puzzling, and rightly so. It may appear that, re-appropriation aside, there is no social context in which using one is appropriate—just as there is no social context in which it is appropriate to be cruel or unjust. We take the point. But, in the first instance, register pertains to what is culturally and discursively apposite. To give an analogy from

descriptive ethics: An egalitarian who insists that it is morally wrong to build social hierarchy into a language may nonetheless observe, about a local tongue, that some of its terms are appropriately used by those born into the aristocracy, others by those who have merely become rich, and so forth. In the same vein, one may contrast (i) describing, *qua* empirical sociolinguist, what a group in fact tolerates/permits when it comes to slurring terms with (ii) prescribing, *qua* normative ethicist, what they ought to.

We end this overview of register by mentioning a significant limitation. There is at present no agreed upon definition of "register" in the sociolinguistics literature. Indeed, as hinted above, there will undoubtedly be readers who find our usage unfamiliar. Even among those who understand "register" roughly as we do, there is disagreement about what kind of metadata-type information should be included: For example, do etymology, collocation patterns and frequency-of-use belong? This relates to the most significant theoretical challenge. A question which confronts semanticists of all stripes concerns what belongs within the language proper. Ultimately, register theorists too need to address this vexing issue of the boundary between general-purpose information versus semantics—here as applied to which facts about usage-patterns belong in a lexical entry.

To note these limitations is not to encourage despair. For instance, while there is no agreement on the exact and exhaustive list of register-features, certain ones appear repeatedly. They include:

> [+child-oriented]: "ca ca", "poop", "bunny", "bum bum", "belly button"
> [+formal]: "excrement", "vomit", "posterior"
> [+medical/clinical]: "feces", "umbilicus", "emesis", "anus"
> [+polite]: "please", "pardon me"
> [+scientific/technical]: "leporidae", "vomitus"
> [+slang]: "take a dump", "lit", "two-four", "heave", "butt"
> [+respectful]: "your honour", "sir/madam"
> [+vulgar]: "shit", "ass", "puke"

Regarding placing something within/outside language proper, there are familiar clues: How systematic are the rules-of-use, how do they interact with grammar, and so forth? The Spanish formality system, for instance, clearly is not mere "worldly knowledge." Which of (5a–c) the speaker chooses fixes which second-person conjugation is required: The present tense of "fumar" ("to smoke") is "Usted fuma" in formal, "Tú fumas" in informal and "Vos fumás" in highly informal. And, as Ethan Nowak noted in conversation, Korean verb declension reflects politeness level. To offer a simplified example, the verb "keuda" ("to grow") in present-tense-declarative varies among: Informal low ("keo"), informal high ("keoyo"), formal low ("keunda") and formal high ("keumnida"). Here, register is patently grammaticalized. In short, the field remains underdeveloped but promising.

This limitation matters because a thoroughgoing defense of our register-based approach will eventually require an empirically and theoretically motivated taxonomy. The list above does not come close. We can only express the reasonable hope that once register (again, in the specific sense presented above) becomes of central interest in philosophy of language and semantics/pragmatics, future work will provide the requisite theoretical framework. On the other hand, introducing the overarching shape of our meaning-pluralist approach thankfully requires much less.

2.4 | A meaning pluralist, register-based theory of slurs: Beyond the "first pass"

Few readers will be familiar with all elements of our synthesis. So, a brief recap is in order. As a "first pass" we said that slurring words are usually lexically marked as slang and vulgar, and are always marked as impolite and derogatory. Drawing (sometimes loosely) on existing research programs, we then spelled out three key notions: Slurs as pejorative terms for an out-group; use-theoretic meanings, and in particular that sub-kind which involves only felicity-type conditions; and sociolinguistic register. Using Table 1, we can summarize by saying that slurs belong in the bottom-right quadrant.

In this "second pass," we can employ the feature geometry and simply say: Slurring words are always marked as [-polite] and typically as [+slang, +vulgar]. Indeed, some are [--polite, ++ vulgar]. Expanding upon each, to mark slurring words as [-polite] is to put them in the same use-theoretic class as "No probs!" and "Bye!" as opposed to "Thank you" and "Farewell." To mark them as typically [+slang] is to class them as falling within the popular argot of a culture, along the same lines as "puke" and "to take a dump" as opposed to "vomit" and "to defecate." To say that slurring words are lexically marked with [+vulgar] is to "fit them" to the same sort of situations where "fuck," "shit" and "twat" are discursively appropriate.

There is much more to add about these three, but the lack of a definitive theory of register-type content limits what we can say. Besides, though more will be added about them, we must focus on [+derogatory]. It is, after all, the most crucial and most novel.

Obviously, words marked [+derogatory] are insulting. But this observation threatens to re-label things. Somewhat more helpful is to say that [+derogatory] terms are always directed at a target (whether real or merely represented as such): They are not pure expletives. And a certain special kind of "put down" is included in their meaning. Our crucial clue about that comes from "derogatory speakings" carried off by words which are not themselves marked [+derogatory]. Consider, for instance, what occurs when a person uses any word in (8) in a derogatory way:

8. (a) bureaucrat

   (b) capitalist

   (c) feminist

   (d) intellectual

   (e) liberal

   (f) relativist

TABLE 1 Varieties of use-theoretic meaning

	Illocutionary act	**Only felicity-type appropriateness conditions**
Particular words/constructions	(i) (2a–c): "Congrats," "Hello," "Welcome"	(i) (3a–c): "Gesundheit," "Shush," "There, there"
	(ii) Explicit performative verbs	(ii) "Bye," "Ciao," "Go Leafs Go," "Fuck off"
Whole classes of words	(i) Sentential moods: Declarative, interrogative, imperative	(i) (4a–d): "poop," "shit," "feces," "excrement"
		(ii) (5a–c): "usted," "tú," "vos"

In such uses the speaker typically feels a strong negative attitude towards the target and wishes to demean it. In any case, she has no qualms about doing so. In light of this, we infer: *Expressions marked as [+derogatory] are appropriate to conversational contexts where the speaker either wishes to insult a target group or is indifferent about doing so.*

That is the nub of things. We can spell out [+derogatory] further by considering its relationship to the other features of slurring words, thereby also expanding upon *their* respective meanings. [+derogatory] does not entail [+slang]. Some words began as slang, latterly entered the "standard tongue," yet remain derogatory: "Coolie" and "hillbilly" are examples. Sometimes a word belongs to the standard dialect but becomes derogatory: "Colored" and "negro" are cases in point. "Gypsy," though not slang, is definitely a slur by our lights, because there now exists a neutral counterpart, namely "Roma." It is even more obvious that [+slang] does not entail [+derogatory].

Patently there are [+vulgar] expressions which are not [+derogatory]: For example, "shit" and "Jesus motherfucking Christ." (The latter exemplifies [++vulgar].) There also seem to be [+derogatory] words which are not [+vulgar]. To take an example we owe to a conversation with Glenda Satne, "fairy" might well be used by an elderly person who eschews coarse words but is homophobic.[11] Similarly for "papist" as used by "refined" anti-Catholics. The slangier "oreo" and "FOB" are also not [+vulgar], but they are [+derogatory] epithets: Respectively, for certain black people ("black on the outside, white on the inside") and for unacculturated recent immigrants.

The feature [-polite] can seem otiose in our account, because [+vulgar] surely entails [-polite]. What is more, how could one be wholly polite while wishing to insult, or being indifferent about doing so? Thus a [+derogatory] word will also, it seems, automatically be [-polite]. Ultimately, whether [-polite] should be included can only be settled in light of a developed theory of register. Regardless, we include it pro tem: As previous examples attest, [-polite] does not entail either [+vulgar] or [+derogatory], so it clearly is a different notion. More importantly, a slurring word being impolite is one thing, it being marked [-polite] in the lexicon is quite another. Our tentative-but-promising conjecture is that the latter obtains.

3 | PART TWO: MEETING THE TWIN AIMS

3.1 | Descriptively and ethically promising

We now argue both that our novel synthesis genuinely affords a promising account of slurs, and that it thereby provides a case study in the value of meaning pluralism.

We begin with ethical/social facets. That slur use is taboo follows directly from the content of their register-features. Their use will frequently be taboo simply because slurs tend to be [+slang, +vulgar] and are always [-polite]. More importantly, to be marked [+derogatory] is, we inferred from disparaging uses of (8a–f), to be a word appropriate for speakers who care not about insulting a target group. A slurring word will, for the same reason, be not just taboo but full-on prohibited when it exhibits some combination of [++derogatory], [--polite] and [++vulgar]. They offend all, not just the specific persons being spoken about, because the very existence of a task-specific word for speakers willing to insult it is per se offensive to the group. The offensiveness is hard to cancel

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[11] Kennedy (2002) observes that the N-word was avoided, even by some virulent racists, not because it was derogatory and offensive, but because it was an uncouth word: "*Nigger* has been a familiar part of the vocabulary of whites high and low. It has often been the calling card of so-called white trash … Partly to distance themselves from this ilk, some whites of higher standing have aggressively forsworn the use of *nigger*. Such was the case, for example, with senators Strom Thurmond and Richard Russell, both white supremacists that never used the N-word" (pp. 7–8).

because it is, for us, built into the term's standing meaning: Whatever the speaker may have in mind, the type "kike" just is [+derogatory]. (A parallel is an L2 speaker who wishes to describe delicately a scene in a romance novel but utters "They fucked": Her intentions notwithstanding, she has used a vulgar word.) As for lack of cancellation when embedded, just as "to take a dump" and "twat" do not cease to be vulgar slang under negation or in the antecedent of a conditional, slurring words do not lose their register-features therein either.

As a result, slurring words are "useless" for enlightened and kind-hearted people. To reiterate, the reason is not that a non-bigot would somehow, despite herself, express hatred and contempt for Hispanics by deploying "spic"; nor is it that she would, again despite herself, state or otherwise mean$_{NN}$ that Hispanics are despicable, should be discriminated against, and so forth. Rather, good people will want to avoid bigot-ready words for innocent out-groups. The proper analogies are: "Fuck" is useless for the prude; and the informal-low "keo" in Korean is useless for one who insists on exaggerated respectfulness.

Why can mitigation nonetheless occur? We distinguished how a word is to-be-used from the sundry ways it has and can be used in actual talk. Though use-theoretic, the former is normative/teleological, and thus admits of violations. (Recall using "Gesundheit!" to scare off a dog.) Given this, a child or non-native speaker merit correction when they utter an English word with a "nasty function"; their culpability is reduced because they do so in ignorance of how it is to-be-used, and without negligence. The treatment of re-appropriation is much more fraught. Our very tentative suggestion is that it involves an unfamiliar sort of non-literal use. As with the L2 speaker's use of "kike," the word which re-appropriators utter genuinely remains [+derogatory] in the wider standard tongue; but, at least initially, in-group speakers are deploying it in a non-derogatory way.[12] To introduce another analogy, two friends of longstanding might develop the humorous habit of greeting each other with "Fuck you dude!" The point of their inside joke would be lost if "Fuck you" had ceased to be [+vulgar] in English. So, in some admittedly puzzling sense, the friends are flouting its meaning rather than altering it. Similarly, we conjecture, for the re-appropriation of the N-word, "queer," and so forth.

Moving beyond the ethical/social, the notorious linguistic facets of slurs are also captured by our register-based view. There will almost always be a neutral counterpart because slurring words refer to groups. Hence, *modulo* some potential outlier cases, there can be a term which shares that referent but lacks its morally problematic register-features. This shared referential component will fix the truth-conditions of complete sentences containing slurring words. That is why (6) at least seems to hold true at precisely those possible worlds where (9) does:

6. There are chinks in Toronto

9. There are Chinese in Toronto

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[12] This is to be contrasted with treating in-group speakers as using a wholly non-derogatory homonym in their "variety of English." That is a tempting way of conceiving of the phenomenon. In particular, it is a plausible account of the variety-specific "niggah," a term with different register features than "nigger." (The relation between these two is fascinating and important but must be set aside here.) As a general strategy, however, it threatens to treat re-appropriation of slurs as too similar to the use of /'shag/ in Canada as a kind of rug versus its use in the United Kingdom as a synonym for "a fuck." By the way, our "at least initially" is essential because a term may lose its [+derogatory, -polite, +slang, +vulgar] features. This has happened almost entirely with "gay" (also "limey" for the English). And there are in-between stages, when things get muddy indeed. These, however, are rich topics for another day.

One is never fully satisfied with any paraphrase of "the propositional difference" because there is no such difference. There is a contrast in standing meaning, but it is not of that descriptive/informational sort: To echo Davidson (1978) on metaphor, just as words are the wrong coin to exchange for pictures, messages are the wrong coin to exchange for use-theoretic meanings. (An important piece of evidence that ours is the right approach to descriptive ineffability is that it is not specific to slurs but pertains to register-type contents generally: It is equally difficult to identify contrasting modes of presentation of the rabbit corresponding to "bunny" versus "laporidae.") Non-redundancy is explained similarly: In producing "There are chinks in Toronto and I despise the Chinese," the speaker may "show" through her use of "chink" that she despises Chinese people. Still, this is not part of the truth-conditional content of the first conjunct: It encodes something truth-conditionally thinner. Hence, there is not a restatement when the despising attitude is subsequently "said" in her second conjunct.

Our novel approach is also promising with respect to two sorts of socially relevant variation. The descriptive/informational part of our account has it that slurring words typically stand for marginalized out-groups. Now, which groups are the scorned "others" vis-à-vis the dominant majority will vary from one language community to another. Cross-linguistic variation arises thereby. Regarding varying degrees of offensiveness within a language, registers in general are not inevitably + or -. Take [vulgar]: "Vagina" is not vulgar at all; "beaver" is mildly vulgar; "pussy" and "twat"; are quite vulgar; while in Canada and the US the C-word is extremely so. Parallel within-language variation arises for [derogatory] and [polite]: Part of knowing the difference in register-content among slurs is to know, for example, that the N-word is, as a matter of lexicography, derogatory and impolite to the point of obscenity.

Before continuing with promising characteristics, a brief methodological excursus is called for. In one respect, we are not semantic minimalists. Qua anti-monists, we posit additional richness in linguistic meaning: Three sub-kinds, in fact. This inclination towards "thickness" in semantics derives from Hallidayan influences and Ordinary Language Philosophy. In another respect, *within* each subkind, we lean methodologically to "thin" semantics. A case in point are the lexical entries we propose for slurring words. Very crudely, such an entry includes only: That the term is a "naughty word" (compare "fuck" or "cock"); that it stands for group such and such; and that it is "used by people who don't like that group." Much information which other theorists include as part of a slur's encoded meaning is, for us, merely about the world: Which stereotypes are associated with Chinese people, lesbians, Jewish people, and so forth, gets categorized by us as real-world knowledge, that is, non-linguistic socio-cultural information about *referents*; the prototypical mental causes and effects of using a slur are equally, by our lights, sundry facts about talk-among-humans. In excising such worldly facts from linguistic meaning proper, our minimalist inspirations are Chomsky/Fodor, Grice (1975), and especially Sperber and Wilson's (1986) Relevance Theory. Finally, we are minimalistically inclined when it comes to the explanatory burdens of semantics within philosophy. A fully successful lexical semantics will leave many issues open for philosophers: When the semanticist pairs a formative with something, she need not delve into the corresponding epistemology, ethics or metaphysics. She may, for instance, content herself with explaining that "persona" in Spanish stands for persons—without feeling compelled to expand upon why persons should not be treated as mere means. She may say that "er" in Mandarin means the number two, while blamelessly failing to explore the epistemology and ontology of numbers. Here, we follow in the footsteps of Borg (2004) and Cappelen and Lepore (2005).

Returning to the main theme, we have shown the promise of our view with respect to both the ethical/social aspects of slurs and their widely studied linguistic facets. With these methodological

remarks in place, we can turn to its potential with respect to the epistemology of slurring, and to a few especially pressing worries.

On the one hand, mastering the meaning of (1a–h) is psychologically undemanding. A young child or a novice L2 learner can (unfortunately) be linguistically competent with slurring words. They need not, for example, know the stereotype associated with "kike" to master the word, nor have familiarity with the (purported) grounds for discriminating against Jewish people (Jeshion, 2013b). Similarly, the linguistically competent user need not be an expert in social psychology, recognizing which precise emotions are expressed with "kike," and which it tends to evoke. On the other hand, there definitely are rich interpretive effects among more sophisticated speakers, pertaining to preju- dices and emotive potentials. The quasi-minimalist nature of our lexical entries for slurs captures both "hands." Grasping the meanings is psychologically easy because slur-semantics is "thin." None- theless, the resulting psychological, social and ethical effects can turn out to be very "thick" because of all the worldly knowledge people have about slurring and its targets.

A case in point: There is no denying that the social/psychological effects of (6) versus (9) sharply con- trast. In particular, one may learn important things about a speaker who chooses the first over the latter:

6. There are chinks in Toronto
9. There are Chinese in Toronto

A critic may suggest that the sentences therefore cannot express the same proposition. Now, our critic's argument is implicitly abductive: The best account of the contrasting informational uptake and other effects is that these sentences encode different truth-conditional contents, owing to the con- trasting senses of "chink" and "Chinese." A superior explanation, however, is that a person who selects (6) over (9) merely shows something ethically suspect about herself—she does not state a richer proposition. A hearer can glean this shown-information using general-purpose cleverness and knowledge about people who use words marked [+derogatory]. (Compare Marta who says, "Poly- synthetic languages are multifaceted." So speaking will provide her interlocutor with information: Marta can pronounce polysyllabic words, is highly educated, and so forth. Yet no one would explain that information as deriving from the sentence's encoded standing meaning.) Our defensive strategy thus runs: While we emphatically agree with propositionalists and Emotivists that there are vital effects hereabouts, we resist including anything extra in slurs' encoded propositional or emotive con- tent to account for them.

Here is another application of our quasi-minimalism, this time about the "thin philosophical burden" of lexical entries. One might complain: Our position is not promising vis-à-vis the social/ethical facets of slurring because we have not said what it is to insult. Still less have we explained what it is to wish to insult, or to be indifferent about doing so. A tempting concessionary response is that this is essential work for later. That, however, is not our stance. We insist that not even a promissory note of the for- future-research variety is owed. Comparable to "persona" and "er," accounts of the nature of insults, or the moral psychology of the insult-maker, do not fall within the remit of philosophical semantics.

We declined to present a full-dress defense of our register-based account. We are content, given present purposes, if the reader acknowledges an approach well worth developing. We have already achieved much towards that end. Still, several worries are so natural and important that we cannot conclude without mentioning them.

A social/ethical worry, traceable to Hom and May (2018) and Richard (2008), is that a view along our lines cannot be promising because the slur-user can state something deeply offensive yet

perfectly true. For instance, (6) is true according to us; and "chinks" has an extension. It allegedly follows that there exist people—more than a billion, including roughly half a million in Toronto—who deserve to be insulted and discriminated against based on being Chinese.[13] Now, adopting anything like *deserve to be insulted and discriminated against on the basis of being Chinese* as the content of "chinks" already begs the question in favor of propositionalism. Beyond pointing to burden of proof violations, and borrowing again from Austin, we would add that sentences can be unhappy in numerous ways. In particular, they can be true without being morally acceptable: For example, when phrased in ethically revolting terminology. Such are "true slurs": For example, (6) is offensive not due to its propositional content, but due to "putting it that way." This is not ad hoc, as a comparison shows: There is nothing offensive about the propositional content *Dr. X swabbed Eric's anus for fecal matter*; but phrasing this as "Dr. X grubbed some shit from Eric's asshole" would be morally unacceptable given certain audiences. Our response, in sum, is to bite the bullet: Claims made using slurring words really can be both offensive and true. However, the true bit is not offensive; and the offensive bit is not even truth-apt (being use-theoretic).

Another worry is that our view is not promising with respect to an epistemological/psychological facet of slurs. Patently, it is only public language words, not mental representations, which exhibit register-features. So, we cannot accommodate slurring thoughts (cf. Copp & Sennet, 2017). Our response requires disentangling two notions. The alleged problem then evaporates. In one sense, we do reject "slurring thoughts": There are no slurring propositions, just slurring language. *Pace* the objector, this is the right result. To stretch an analogy, "slurring proposition" is akin to "rhyming proposition." In another sense, we are happy to grant that "slurring thoughts" exist: Namely, thoughts couched in inner speech using slurring expressions. Just as we acknowledge rhyming thoughts in this latter sense, we happily grant that some of the sentences which run through our heads contain words marked as [+vulgar], [+slang], and so forth.

Worry number three: There must be a difference in reference between slurring words and their so-called counterparts, as is shown by failure of substitution in transparent contexts. Consider, in this light, (10a) versus (10b):

10. (a) Chang isn't Chinese, he is Chinese

    (b) Chang isn't a chink, he is Chinese

Only the second sounds true.

Our response will not surprise. We take the folk to interpret (10b) charitably, for pragmatic reasons, as a metalinguistic negation. That is, despite the propositional content encoded by (10b) in English, we hearers easily construe it as in (11):

11. Chang is not a so-called 'chink', he is Chinese

Why does charity yield this result? First, the pragmatically modified reading avoids attributing a contradictory assertion to a speaker. More than that, reconstruing (10b) as (11) allows one to hear its speaker as putting forward a *morally important* truth.

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[13] To come at the point another way, these philosophers would presumably disagree with us that "pedophile"/"torturer" are offensive and insulting *in a different way* than "chink"/"kike": For them, all would express an offensive property. They would add that while there are satisfiers of "pedophile" and "torturer," who thereby merit opprobrium, the extensions of "chink" and "kike" must be empty—otherwise, one would make a problematic concession to the bigot.

Is this appeal to metalinguistic negation ad hoc? It is not, because the same effect shows up where there patently is co-reference. The sentence "Paul isn't gay, he is gay" is manifestly contradictory. Yet if Robert, in responding to a homophobic remark, pronounced only the first "gay" with an exaggerated tone stereotypically associated with flamboyant homosexual men, he could easily be understood as correcting a prior speaker, and stating something non-contradictory. This possible use cannot show that the lexical item "gay" fails to co-refer with "gay."

Put otherwise, focusing only on the linguistically encoded propositional content of (10b), there is co-reference. As a result, (10b) is not just false but self-contradictory—in just the way that (10a) is. (Compare "That is not a bunny rabbit, that is a leporidae," which typically would not be, but can be, heard as contradictory under special circumstances.) On the charitable re-construal of (10b), one hears it as true; but the upshot at best is that "so-called 'chink'" cannot be substituted salva veritate for "Chinese."

The heard contrast between (10a) and (10b) does not establish failure of co-reference between slurring words and their non-slurring correlates. Still, it may seem that substitution in opaque contexts, of a slur for its correlate, changes the truth conditions of the whole sentence. Truth conditions, runs the objection, are fixed by modes of presentation. So, even if slurs and their counterparts co-refer, they must have differing senses. For instance, if the sense of "chink" and "Chinese" were the same, then the truth-conditions of (12a)/(12b) should be identical. Similarly for (13a)/(13b)[14]:

12. (a) Justina thinks that all Chinese are Chinese

(b) Justina thinks that all Chinese are chinks

13. (a) Trump argued that Republicans should try to woo Hispanic voters

(b) Trump argued that Republicans should try to woo spic voters

Again, that is not how we hear them: There are scenarios in which the (a) sentences sound true while the (b) sentences do not. In particular, (12a) is truistic about Justina; but we assure the reader that no one who knows her would accept (12b), because Justina holds no morally worrisome beliefs whatever about the Chinese. It is straightforward to construct a similar scenario for (13).

Our reply coincides with Jeshion's (2013b, p. 327ff.) defense of her Emotivism in the face of related examples. The folk do indeed hear the (a)/(b) sentences as having different truth-conditions. As Kripke's puzzling cases teach, however, what follows from this is fraught—because propositional attitude and discourse reporting verbs are in play. It is certainly unsafe to infer contrasting senses between the substituends. At most, we can infer some sort of *meaning* difference. But register-features already provide one. On these grounds alone, our view plausibly makes the right predictions.

More than that, there is independent reason to think that register-features block substitution in various opaque contexts. "Poop" and "shit" surely share not just reference but sense, yet (14a)/(14b) are readily heard as non-equivalent in (literal) propositional content:

14. (a) Overindulgent parents think that all shit is shit

(b) Overindulgent parents think that all shit is poop

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[14] Examples along these lines are owed to Christopher Hom, Robert May, and Adam Sennet.

Only the second, for example, would be taken to express something informative and judgmental. The pair in (15), which parallels the discourse-reporting (13a)/(13b), is similar: One who accepts (15b) will reasonably take Harvey to be guilty of very poor taste, and probably of workplace harassment. Not so (15a):

15. (a) Harvey argued that wait staff should present their buttocks as buttocks

    (b) Harvey argued that wait staff should present their buttocks as asses

The lesson is that, in the face of this fourth worry, our view about slurs remains promising—because, given independently attested facts about register-features under certain opaque contexts, it automatically predicts what one will hear as the truth-conditions.[15]

3.2 | Promising qua meaning pluralist

It remains to defend the claim that, if correct, our account of slurring words provides a case study in the value of meaning pluralism. One should not feel concern that the view is not pluralist. There is the vital role, for us, of what slurring words stand for. (Here is another illustration: While "asshole" shares all four register-features with slurring words, it is not itself one given its descriptive/informational content.) In addition, ideas from the Emotivist tradition are crucial: We have specified the pre-conditions for apt use in terms of negative mental attitudes. Finally, part of what sets slurring words apart for us has to do with contrasting felicity-type rules of use. The natural worry, rather, is whether register is a kind of meaning. After all, what differentiates a slur is reminiscent of metadata about etymology, co-occurrence proclivities, and so forth.

As a preliminary, we must sidestep a terminological issue. Suppose a theorist declares by fiat that "meaning" shall pertain, for her, only to descriptive/informational content. The existence and importance of register in particular, and rules-of-use in general, cannot convince her that meaning includes more. Or again, suppose that by her verbal legislation "meaning" must involve the expression of mental states, whether "cognitive" or "non-cognitive." None of our examples can refute her. In short, we are powerless to falsify stipulations about how to use the vocable /miːnɪŋ/. That, happily, is not the issue.

Instead, a first substantive question is whether there is a theoretically and practically important kind in play. A kind not pertaining to "form" (e.g., phonology and morphosyntax). A kind which explains salient phenomena such as our pre-theoretical conceptions of acceptable translations, of (in)correct understanding, of when a L2 learner has mastered a word, and so forth. A kind which has fascinated pragmaticians, philosophers of language and semanticists. Though not something we can establish here—it would require, for example, refuting Quinean indeterminacy—it is plausible enough that such a kind exists. To avoid terminological battles, let us label it the **significance-kind**.

Granting this, a second substantive question is whether register-features belong therein. Here is a "master argument" for a positive answer. There definitely is a difference in usage patterns among co-referring words with contrasting registers. Given the above, such a difference must trace to the form-kind or the significance-kind: No other "linguistic causes" are in the offing. Some such patterns trace to form: Tongue twisters are avoided because of how hard they are to pronounce; multiple center-embeddings are avoided because their syntactic trees are difficult to process online; and so forth. One cannot discount

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[15] A larger lesson—as a "by the way"— is that postulating an additional sub-kind of meaning, which initially looks anti-minimalist, can reduce the "thickness" of the meanings we countenance *within* each sub-kind: Here, the slurs' senses are kept "thin" by relying on use-theoretic register-type meaning.

explanations based on linguistic form-kind a priori. However, barring potential future discoveries, the best explanation of patterns in slur-usage does not involve phonetics, phonology or morphosyntax: For example, "chink" does not differ from "Chinese" in relevant ways when it comes to ease of pronunciation, nor with respect to morphological complexity. Assuming significance-kind the best explanation, we should therefore place register-features, including those attaching to slurring words, among the "meaning causes." Adding to this abductive inference, it is agreed by (almost?) all hands that, ceteris paribus, it is meaning which is metaphysically connected to regularities in usage.

In sum, stubbornness about labels notwithstanding, our case study suggests that content-monism should be rejected. So should content-dualism.

4 | PART THREE: COMPARE AND CONTRAST

4.1 | Slurring registers are not just descriptive/informational

Our goal has been to lay out a positive view: To place another promising option on the table. This means we will disappoint readers seeking a definitive defense. What we can offer instead is a "third pass"—that is, additional clarification—in the shape of a compare-and-contrast. (Be forewarned: This will not take the form "they posit propositional content and we do not," nor "they invoke emotions and desires and we do not." That would not be pluralist.) The first contrast is with the overarching approach which conceives of language as a vehicle for message transfer—so as, on some variations, to thereafter coordinate on action.

Grice (1975/1989) introduced an influential taxonomy within this framework. He categorized the various "causes" which can give rise to information exchange and introduced several sub-varieties of "effects." We will organize our comparing/contrasting around that taxonomy.

The first sub-division is between **very-largely-conventional causes** versus causes which go well beyond what conventions afford, invoking in particular a great deal of **general-purpose reasoning.** ("Very-largely-conventional" rather than "wholly conventional" because Grice acknowledges that conventional linguistic meanings alone seldom determine the message meant, for example, because of disambiguation and context-sensitive items.)

Grice also sub-divides the very-largely-conventional in terms of "informational effects." There exist his **what is said** and his **conventional implicatures**. Into the latter category, Grice places those contents which would not, to his ears, make an utterance *strictly speaking false* should the conventionally encoded proposition(s) prove non-factual. He seems to us to operationalize his intuitive contrast in a way contemporary logicians and semanticists might find peculiar. Roughly, his "what is strictly said" can be straightforwardly/isomorphically translated into logical languages familiar during the 1960s. In contrast, the propositional message linguistically encoded in conventional implicatures requires, for example, additional conjuncts in the corresponding logical translation. Taking Grice's most famous example, while there was an item in mid-20th century logics corresponding to "and," there was not one corresponding to "but." So, whereas one could translate "Jane is poor and she is honest" constituent-for-constituent as [POOR (jane) and HONEST (jane)], for "Jane is poor but she is honest" one needed to resort to something like: {[POOR (jane) and HONEST (jane)] and CONTRAST (poverty, honesty)}. (CONTRAST being that relation encoded by "but" in English, however explicated.) Table 2 summarizes.

An essential feature of Grice's taxonomy is that, in a broad sense of the phrase "truth-conditions," all three quadrants involve them: The speaker means$_{NN}$ something in each case, but only judgeable-contents can be meant$_{NN}$. Relatedly, in all three the contents meant$_{NN}$ will have a translation into a logical

TABLE 2 Grice's taxonomy

	Very largely conventional	Much general-purpose reasoning
Straightforward isomorphic translation into formal logic	What is said	
Non-isomorphic translation required	Conventional implicatures	Conversational implicatures

symbolism. This can be missed because writers, Grice unhelpfully among them, sometimes use "truth-conditions" in a narrow way, for something like the strict and literal truth conditions of the speech act.

Turning to compare-and-contrast, on a "what is said" approach, a slurring word exhibits a conventional difference—one within the public, synchronic language—in both sense and reference from any (alleged) neutral counterpart. Being unable to canvass variations, we illustrate with Christopher Hom and Robert May's ideas. Adapting from Hom (2008, p. 431), the symbolic logic correlate of (6) would be something like (16), where CHINK is true of x iff (a) x is Chinese and (ii) x ought to be subject to the local anti-Chinese discriminatory practices because of exhibiting the locally-attributed negative properties which Chinese people exhibit *qua* Chinese:

6. There are chinks in Toronto

9. There are Chinese in Toronto

16. $(\exists x)\,[\text{CHINK}(x) \,\&\, \text{IN}(x)(\text{Toronto})]$

Hom (2008, 2010, 2012) and Hom and May (2013) would not translate the "neutral" (9) this way. For them, while "Chinese" has an extension, and (9) is true, CHINK lacks an extension and (6)/(16) are false.

We acknowledge that there is a difference in type meaning. Not, however, in sense or reference; only in "fittingness" for discursive situations. For instance, only "chink" is marked in the lexicon as [-polite, +slang, +vulgar] and most importantly [+derogatory]. Put otherwise, we would translate "chink" and "Chinese" into the same predicate in a purely logical meta-language: Both would correspond to CHINESE. Hence both terms have the same (rather large) extension.

A comparison with conventional implicature views is challenging because the label is used equivocally.[16] Beginning with the easier case where the usage follows Grice (1975/1989), conventional implicatures—like what is said and what is conversationally implicated—are meant$_{NN}$. One can believe what is conventionally implicated, intend others to judge it true, and so forth. Moreover, this content will be part of standing linguistic meaning. Applied to slurs, the translation of the type meaning of (6) might thus be:

17. $(\exists x)\,[\text{CHINESE}(x) \,\&\, \text{IN}(x)(\text{Toronto})] \,\&\, [(\forall x)\,(\text{CHINESE}(x) \rightarrow \text{MERIT-DISCRIMINATION}(x)]$

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[16] Who embraces the conventional implicature approach to slurs? This is not an unambiguous question, and hence demands exegetical caution. This is not, thankfully, the place to engage the issue. Regarding who self-applies the label, they include McCready (2010), Potts (2005, 2007), Whiting (2013), and Williamson (2009). As presented, none of these seem notational variants on our view—but, as will emerge immediately below, the appearances may mislead (cf. Bach 1999, 2006).

Now, register (in our sense) is included, as a matter of linguistic convention, in the lexicon. A fortiori, we concur that slurring words like (1a–h) are not synonymous with "Chinese," and so forth. Put psychologically, we agree that knowledge of a word's register-features is knowledge of language properly so-called. We disagree that truth-conditions, even of the broad sort, are involved: In place of (17)'s second conjunct, for example, we introduce something strictly use-theoretic. In short, the logical translation not just of "what is said" by "There are chinks in Toronto" but of its truth-conditions tout court is (18):

18. $(\exists x)$ [CHINESE(x) & IN(x)(Toronto)]

Some theorists use Grice's nomenclature such that conventional implicatures do not fit anywhere on Table 2. Specifically, some seemingly eschew a difference in truth conditions even in our "broad" sense when a conventional implicature is added to "what is said." The contrasting meaning is *sui generis.* Recalling "Jane is poor *and/but* she is honest," these quasi-Gricean theorists would take their logical translations to be precisely the same: [POOR (jane) and HONEST (jane)].

This latter approach closely approximates ours. Indeed, there may be variations which we would welcome as fellow travelers: for example, if conventional implicatures are cashed out in terms of use-theoretic appropriateness-conditions. Differences might then persist only in the details: Is some cousin of metadata invoked? Are register-features made use of—and the same four that we attribute to slurring words? When characterizing the discursively appropriate situations for slurs, is appeal made to the willingness-to-insult which speakers should feel? And so on.

The final sub-variety of descriptive/informational approaches contrasts with the prior two in terms of Gricean "cause." Conversational implicature accounts involve a heavy dose of general-purpose reasoning about rational cooperation. Phrased in cognitive scientific terms, understanding of the special content of slurs is not achieved by drawing upon meaning-information stored in the language faculty; other parts of the mind turn the trick. Yes, there is some conventional difference between a slurring word and its neutral correlate; but, goes the idea, the speaker pragmatically conveys the extra *content* by relying on the audience's worldly cleverness.

Geoffrey Nunberg (2018), a proponent of this kind of view, provides a very telling analogy:

> The week after the Monica Lewinsky story broke, the *New York Times* Week in Review section ran its story about it under a picture of the White House at night that was headed *Scandale.* When I asked an editor at the section why they felt the need to put that final *e* on the word, he said, "Oh, that's so readers will know it's about sex and not money". Now most Americans would assume, correctly, that French *scandale* and English *scandal* are synonyms: when Frenchmen say *Quel scandale!* they express pretty much the same thought that we would express with 'What a scandal!' The added implications of using the French word in an English context arise from a familiar cultural stereotype of the French' (Nunberg, 2018, p. 267).

The headline managed to cleverly convey "broad truth conditions" by using formally and culturally distinct synonyms. The suggestion with respect to slurring words is that something very similar is at work: "Chink" and "Chinese" are complete synonyms as far as knowledge of meaning-in-English

goes, but, we well-versed speakers know metadata which allows us to creatively mean$_{NN}$ contrasting things with them.[17]

We share with such a conversational implicature theorist the commitment to the same sense and reference. We equally take on board the very original idea that metadata is centrally involved. We disagree, of course, that the "effect" is generally a message, however conveyed. Such implicating sometimes occurs with slurring speech: a person can intend to induce the belief that it is acceptable to insult Chinese people, and so on in familiar Gricean fashion, by showily selecting the word "chink." But we deny both that this conversational effect is inevitable, or that it captures the heart of slurring words' content. More subtly, we differ on the "cause" of slur-effects. First, unlike "scandal/scandale," we take the cause to be a matter of content. (Register-features belong to the significance-kind, not the form-kind.) Second, to reiterate, unlike cultural stereotypes about the French, we take this content to be linguistically encoded.[18]

We have contrasted our register-based view with that family of theories which takes slurring content to be exhausted by descriptive/informational messages. We end with the other dominant family.

4.2 | Slurring registers are not just expressive/emotive

There is not *a* doctrine of Emotivism in semantics, nor *a* doctrine of Emotivism about slurring words. So, we cannot compare our register-based view with "it." Our clarificatory aim can be advanced, nonetheless, by constructing as our foil one sophisticated *ur*-variant, couched at a high level of abstraction from specific proposals.

Thinking of it as a general-purpose approach, the idea would be that sentence (19) and (for some philosophers) sentence (20) *do* have a sort of propositional content. They are also, however, used to express something psychologically rich and subtle, such as disapprobation:

19. I am appalled by that behavior

20. Torture is morally wrong

That is, beyond descriptive/informational content, there is an Emotivist rule-of-use for these. It specifies which "non-cognitive" mental state such a sentence is suited to express.

Applying this general approach to slurring words, they too would have both kinds of content. The rule-of-use specific to them might be something like: *To be used by people who have a certain conceptually rich negative attitude towards the referent of the slurring word.* Thus "chink," for example,

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[17] Renee Bolinger (2015) seems to have a similar account in mind. She sagely develops it, however, in terms of her (purposely ambiguous) notion of "signaling," to allow for unintentional communication of contents which are not properly propositional.

[18] We may reformulate this first half of our compare-and-contrast by forefronting another terminological tangle. The term "semantic" is used in half a dozen cross-cutting ways (Ezcurdia & Stainton, 2013). Of central interest is semantics$_{type}$ versus semantics$_{truth}$. The first pertains to content which conventionally attaches to the expression in the shared language. Put psychologically, semantics$_{type}$ pertains to meaning-proclivities stored as part of knowledge of language proper. The second pertains to truth-conditions, whether narrow or broad. A use-theorist will not just concede but insist that "Hello!" and "Gesundheit!" lack semantics$_{truth}$. But, they will insist, it is a fallacy of equivocation to infer that these lack semantics$_{type}$. Given this terminology, the fundamental difference between descriptive/informational views and our own can be stated thus. Those in our Gricean table all hold that slurring involves semantics$_{truth}$. We think otherwise. They disagree among themselves about whether slurring words differ from their neutral counterparts in terms of semantics$_{type}$, and we align with the what-is-said and conventional-implicature theorists. In brief, there is a difference in semantics$_{type}$ between "chink" and "Chinese," but there is no difference of any sort in semantics$_{truth}$.

would be a term fitted for use by people who hold the Chinese to be contemptible, unworthy of equal standing, appropriately subject to a discriminatory perspective (Camp, 2013), not fully persons, or what have you.[19]

Such a refined Emotivism shares many features with our register-based approach. It is agreed that, for example, "chink" does refer, and "There are chinks in Toronto" is truth-evaluable; but that one cannot capture the complete content of slurring words via sense/reference. Put otherwise, a slur's content cannot be wholly captured by translation into even an especially esoteric judgement-centred logical symbolism.

Shared, in short, is a meaning dualism. Moreover, there are not two kinds of sentences—one with solely referential and truth-conditional content, one with only emotive content. Rather, as in (19), the two kinds of content interconnect in a single expression. (Contrast a very crude and old-fashioned Emotivism (unfairly) associated with Ayer (1936), Stevenson (1944). "I am in pain," goes the idea, has exclusively emotive/expressive content: It's merely a highly conventionalized way of grunting/groaning. Whereas "The speed of light is constant" has exclusively empirical/factual content.)

Equally shared is the postulation of normative rules-of-use for slurring words. Our *ur*-Emotivist has it that slurring words like (1a–h) are tools for expressing mental attitudes. She thus predicts, correctly, that speakers may utter them in many circumstances without having or externalizing a sophisticated negative attitude, let alone a strong negative feeling like hatred, fear, and so forth. (For a variety of examples of "warm-hearted" uses of slurring words, see Diaz-Legaspe and Stainton, 2018.)

Finally, we coincide in holding that appeal to attitudinal states is important in explaining both the meaning and ethics of slurring words.

The foregoing Emotivist view thus closely parallels ours. Indeed, it achieves our ambitious aim. If true, it would entail a full-blown pluralism about contents: There are not just propositional and expressive contents, but also rules-of-use for job-bearing linguistic devices. We thus welcome anyone falling under this broad umbrella as, again, fellow travelers.

There are, however, contrasts to be drawn. As a minor point, the specific attitudinal state we focus on is different. More significantly, consider the relationship among slurring words, the associated negative attitudes, and offense-potential, as represented in Figure 1:
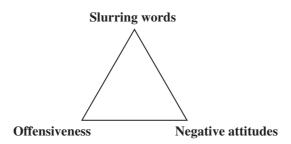

Slurring words

Offensiveness **Negative attitudes**

FIGURE 1 Elements in slurring

Our sophisticated Emotivist claims a direct meaning-based connection between slurring terms and attitudes. These mental states—whether anger, contempt, disrespect, a discriminatory perspective, and so forth—are offensive to the targeted group. Hence using the slur is derivatively/indirectly morally objectionable. In effect, the wrongness goes via the right side and then the bottom of the

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[19] Though not exegetical, in formulating this sophisticated *ur*-Emotivism we have drawn heavily on the incisive work of Robin Jeshion. She writes, for instance: "slurring terms are used to express contempt for members of a socially relevant group on account of their being in that group or having a group-defining property" (2013a, p. 240).

mutually-agreed-upon triangle. For us, the connections are more intricate. On the one hand, we do recognize a slur-to-attitude connection via the right-hand line, because the situation appropriate to [+derogatory] terms happens to be characterized in terms of willingness to insult. With the sophisticated Emotivist, we here locate a path to explaining the ethical/social features of slurring: Slur → attitude → offensiveness. On the other hand, we additionally posit a direct meaning-based connection to offensiveness, along the left-hand line of the triangle. Contra every Emotivism, for a speaker to select a slur, purposely rejecting a neutral correlate, may be immediately wrongful: That is, in opting for a [+derogatory, -polite, +vulgar] word, the speaker may *ipso facto* merit blame, whatever her mental proclivities. We thus predict, but by dual routes, the pattern which the Emotivist rightly emphasizes, namely that people uttering slurs typically exhibit contempt, hatred, and so forth.

The deepest difference between our view and this *ur*-Emotivism is closely related. For us, not all talk involves making public one's internal mental states, whether "cognitive" or "non-cognitive." Much of it involves directly pulling off, collectively, social actions. Seemingly every Emotivism about slurring words must resist this essential lesson of Functional Linguistics and Ordinary Language Philosophy.[20]

5 | CONCLUDING REMARKS

At the risk of over clarifying, we conclude with a reminder of: The ingredients in our synthesis; their sources; and how they combine to meet our twin aims.

We borrow from the two families of accounts which have dominated discussion. From the descriptive/informational one we take on board that, certain philosophically intriguing outliers aside ("pleb," "crone"), slurring words refer to special sorts of groups. Moreover, this family's compositional semantic rules are necessary to capture the whole meaning of sentences in which words like (1a–h) embed.

From the expressive/emotive family, we take over the important idea that slurs involve negative attitudes and feelings.

We complement these with use-theoretic meanings. They do not pertain to externalizing mental states, but rather link directly to social actions. There are indirect connections to mental states, of course, both because beliefs and desires motivate our speakings, and because felicity conditions sometimes mention the mental (e.g., "It is infelicitous to bet $2 on Argentina's Pride if you have no *intention* of paying up"). Nonetheless, use-theoretic meanings are fundamentally rules for socio-cultural interaction. We particularly highlighted those where there is no illocutionary act—no

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[20] We are not aiming to establish the superiority of our view over every contender, so we have not attempted to discuss each theory of slurs. In the interest of recognizing their insights, however, we mention two additional candidate fellow travelers (i.e., beyond the non-Gricean conventional implicature theorist and the sophisticated Emotivist). Predelli's (2013) position shares many important commonalities with ours, including specifically a discerning appeal to appropriate contexts of use (which he calls "bias") and even register-features. Simplifying, one difference is that Predelli seems to be pursuing a reductionist tack: He is keen to find a single kind of "meaning" to which a single logical formalism straightforwardly applies. Relatedly, Predelli's overall project seems one of quasi-instrumentalist modelling, so that it is permissible by his lights to sideline various psychological facets of slurring words. We hold, in contrast, that a realist description of the use and understanding of natural language demands rejecting even his kind of monism (cf. Kaplan 1999). Anderson and Lepore's (2013a, 2013b) approach to slurring words as socially prohibited taboo words is deeply resonant with ours, not least in failing to fall into either the propositional or the Emotivist camps. However, rather than treating slur-prohibition as primitive, we want to explain it in terms of problematic register-features. We hope to address both views in more detail (and more justly) in a future paper.

reasonable "hereby"-paraphrase—but only sociolinguistic appropriateness conditions. (Recall "Gesundheit!" as opposed to, say, "I hereby bet that Argentina's Pride will place first.")

We also made use of the Functionalists' idea of words and constructions as purpose-specific tools, that is, a system of devices which a speaker may choose from. In particular, we emphasized lexical and grammatical "tools" differing only in their suitability for contrasting discourse situations. That a speaker may flout an expression's function permits non-literal uses, even in the case of use-theoretic meanings.

Methodologically, our view is minimalist in two senses. It endorses generative grammar's distinction between usage-phenomena which trace to properly linguistic causes versus other non-linguistic "performance effects." It also endorses the stance of Borg (2004) and others that semantic content owes relatively few philosophical debts. The result is a fairly "thin" content for slurring words.

The final ingredient is lexical metadata. The sort we invoke is similar to familiar sorts of metadata about collocation, frequency, and so forth, but diverges in two key respects: It belongs within knowledge of language proper, that is, within "linguistic competence"; and it is normative.

From these half-dozen sources, we constructed an account of the meaning of slurring words. They typically refer, specifically to marginalized out-groups who do not actually merit opprobrium. Appeal to this referential aspect helps distinguish a non-slur like "pedophile" or "asshole" from a slur like "chink." Slurring words are also marked with register-features. These encode non-illocutionary use-theoretic meaning, specifically conditions concerning which contexts (in a wide-ranging sense) they are appropriate for. Importantly, there exist systems of lexical items whose members differ only in their register-features: For example, "usted"/"tú"/"vos" and "excrement"/"poop"/"shit." This register aspect yields the contrast between the otherwise synonymous "chink" and "Chinese."

Phrased using our feature geometry, slurring words are usually marked [+slang, +vulgar] and are always marked [-polite], [+derogatory]. This last merits special attention. Its content, as a matter of descriptive sociolinguistics, is tentatively given thus: Terms marked with [+derogatory] are appropriate to discourse situations where the speaker either wishes to insult the designated out-group or is unconcerned about doing so. (Given our second goal, the pluralism herein merits underlining: There is reference, a rule-of-use regarding fittingness to a discourse situation, and that situation is characterized in terms of negative attitudes.)

Turning to why using a slurring word is typically ethically unacceptable, it is not because the speaker conveys (in whatever fashion) a "slurring proposition." There are no such things. It is not (solely) because the person experiences a morally repugnant mental attitude while speaking, and externalizes it verbally. Rather, on the one hand, it can sometimes be unacceptable—offensive, rude—to use slurring words simply because they are [-polite, +slang, +vulgar]. Much more importantly, it will standardly be ethically unacceptable for this reason: As a matter of its meaning in the shared language, a given slurring word exists so that it may be chosen over a neutral term by people who are willing to insult an entire out-group. Anyone who opts for such a perfectly nasty word will, absent mitigating factors, be blameworthy.

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