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Focus on slurs

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Slurring expressions display puzzling behaviour when embedded, such as under negation and in attitude and speech reports. They frequently appear to retain their characteristic qualities, like offensiveness and propensity to derogate. Yet it is sometimes possible to understand them as lacking these qualities. A theory of slurring expressions should explain this *variability*. We develop an explanation that deploys the linguistic notion of focus. Our proposal is that a speaker can conversationally implicate metalinguistic claims about the aptness of a focused slurring expression. This explanation of variability relies on independently motivated mechanisms and is compatible with any theory of slurring expressions.

KEYWORDS
focus, implicature, metalinguistic, pragmatics, slurs

1 | INTRODUCTION

A typical characterisation of *slurring expressions* takes them to possess "derogatory force" that appears to derogate even when embedded (Hom, 2010, p. 168). For instance, occurrences of (1b)—where a slurring expression is embedded under negation—frequently have the same qualities that characterise occurrences of (1a) (offensiveness, derogation, etc.):

1. a. Isiah is a kike.
   b. Isiah is not a kike. (Camp, 2013, p. 330)

Yet it has been widely observed that some occurrences of embedded slurring expressions appear to lack these characteristic qualities. For instance, (1b) might sometimes be understood as "utterly inoffensive" and used "in order to reject the derogatory [expression]" (Hornsby, 2001, p. 129). We call this divergent behaviour of embedded slurring expressions "*variability*":

> **Variability**: For certain sentences that embed slurring expressions, *non-pejorative construals* (which lack some characteristic quality possessed by unembedded uses of slurring expressions) are available, alongside *pejorative construals* (which have more, if not all, of the qualities of unembedded uses).

Non-pejorative construals have been recognised in the literature under various labels, including "nonderogatory, nonappropriated" uses (Hom, 2008, p. 429) and "Embedding Failure" (Bolinger, 2017, p. 1).

A complete theory of slurring expressions should predict and explain variability. This task poses difficulties for existing theories. We develop an explanation that draws on the linguistic phenomenon of *focus*, where vocal emphasis is used to indicate that certain alternative items are relevant to understanding an occurrence of a sentence (see Büring, 2016; Kratzer, 1991; Rooth, 1985; Selkirk, 1984). For example, where capitalised syllables are to be read with vocal emphasis, alternative individuals that may have died are relevant to our understanding of (2a), and alternative properties that Grandpa may have are relevant to our understanding of (2b):

2. a. GRANDpa didn't die. (GRANDma died.)
   b. Grandpa didn't DIE. (He went on HOLiday.)
   c. Grandpa didn't DIE. (He passed aWAY.)

(2c) exhibits *expression focus* (see Krifka, 2008; Li, 2017; Wedgwood, 2005), a special type of focus where it is alternative linguistic items, rather than non-linguistic items, that are relevant. Our proposal is that the presence of expression focus on a slurring expression allows the speaker to conversationally implicate metalinguistic claims about the *aptness* of that expression. The presence of a sentential operator (e.g., negation) affects the aptness claim conveyed, resulting in the availability of non-pejorative metalinguistic construals (e.g., that the slurring expression is *not* apt for certain purposes). Our proposal follows from an account of expression focus, which is independently required for a theory of communication. Moreover, our explanation is compatible with any theory of slurring expressions.

In Section 2, we describe the problem in more detail. In Section 3, we give an overview of focus and an account of expression focus. In Section 4, we use the account of expression focus to explain variability.

2 | VARIABILITY

We discuss sentences where slurring expressions are embedded under negation or in attitude or speech reports (Section 2.1). We then consider the strategies deployed by existing theories in an attempt to predict and explain variability (Section 2.2).

2.1 | The problem

While pejorative construals remain prominent for negated sentences like (1b), many theorists have also detected non-pejorative construals.

    1b. Isiah is not a kike.

For instance, Hornsby (2001, p. 129) states that occurrences may be used in order to reject the slurring expression, whereupon we might gloss the sentences "so that the word is mentioned rather than used: '['kike'] is not what he ought to be called.'"[1]

Non-pejorative construals are particularly prominent for *negations with correction*: sentences that include both a slurring expression embedded under negation and an apt expression for referring to the group targeted by the slurring expression. Hom (2008, p. 429) reports that sentences like the following make claims that are "meaningful, true and nonderogatory":

    3. a. I'm not a kike, I'm a Jew. (Hom & May, 2013, p. 304)
        b. Chinese people are not chinks. (Hom, 2008, p. 429)

Similarly, pejorative construals often emerge for indirect speech and attitude reports (see Anderson & Lepore, 2013, p. 29; Whiting, 2013, p. 368):

    4. a. Eric said that a bitch ran for President of the United States in 2008. (Anderson & Lepore, 2013, p. 29)
        b. I am not prejudiced against Caucasians. But John, who is, thinks/claims that you are the worst honky he knows. (Schlenker, 2007, p. 98)

Nevertheless, some have identified non-pejorative construals. For instance, Camp (2018) takes certain indirect reports to be environments where it is "quite easy" to "quarantine" the slur's offensiveness (see also Cepollaro et al., 2019, p. 39; Schlenker, 2007, p. 239).

It is important to distinguish indirect reports from *direct* reports like (5):

    5. Eric said/claimed, "a bitch ran for President of the United States in 2008."

Unlike (4a), (5) relates the reported speaker to quoted expressions marked by overt indicators of quotation, such as quotation marks or italics. Non-pejorative construals of *direct* reports can be easily delivered via accounts of quotation.[2] However, syntactic and truth-conditional differences between the two types of reports caution against extending such accounts to *indirect* reports with the aim of delivering non-pejorative construals. While the truth conditions of direct reports normally require the reported speaker to have uttered the quoted expressions, indirect reports are more flexible:

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[1]Some theorists (e.g., Bolinger, 2017, fn. 14; Cepollaro & Thommen, 2019) have attributed non-pejorative construals of slurring expressions embedded under negation to occurrences of *metalinguistic negation* (see Horn, 1985). We agree; however, we take the phenomenon of metalinguistic negation to be best explained via analyses of expression focus (see fn. 7 below).

[2]That is, the slurring expressions are clearly marked as mentioned rather than used, and sentences containing quotations express answers to questions under discussion (see Section 3.1) about language use.

6. a. Sam: Sue wants a Porsche.
      John: Sam said that Sue wants a car. (Brasoveanu & Farkas, 2007, p. 30)
   b. A: I could use some salt on this pork chop.
      B: She said she'd like the salt. (Camp, 2006, p. 285)

One response to these observations would be to deny variability. For instance, Anderson and Lepore (2013, p. 29) express scepticism about the availability of non-pejorative construals for sentences like (1b) and (3a)–(4b). Given the prevalence of the view that non-pejorative construals *are* available, such an approach would ideally explain why this impression has arisen. A second response is to accept, and seek to explain, the availability of both pejorative and non-pejorative construals. The current paper develops resources for those who pursue this second type of response.

2.2 | Extant discussion

We discuss how the most prominent semantic and non-semantic accounts of slurring expressions attempt to explain variability. We will argue that our own proposal is preferable.

According to *semantic* accounts, slurring expressions include a pejorative component as part of their truth-conditional meaning. Hom and May claim that a "lexical marker of pejoration" (2013, p. 298) causes "kike" to express the property of being such that one ought to be the target of negative moral evaluation for being Jewish. Their account predicts the availability of non-pejorative construals of sentences where slurring expressions are embedded under negation, because the marker of pejoration is within the scope of the negation operator. For instance, (1b) expresses the proposition that it is *not* the case that Isiah ought to be the target of negative moral evaluation for being Jewish. To explain the availability of pejorative construals, Hom and May (2013) claim that "when speakers use predicates, they typically conversationally implicate their commitment to the non-null extensionality of the predicate" (p. 310).

This proposal for explaining variability is inextricable from the view that slurring expressions have null extensions. Given recent criticisms of this view (Cepollaro & Thommen, 2019; Marques, 2017; Sennet & Copp, 2015), many theorists would prefer an explanation of variability that does not presuppose it. The proposal that we develop in Section 4 is compatible with semantic *and* non-semantic accounts.

In contrast with semantic accounts, non-semantic accounts typically predict the availability of pejorative construals while struggling to explain non-pejorative ones. Any explanations that are given tend to either be underdeveloped or rely on non-standard machinery. For instance, *conventional implicature* accounts (McCready, 2010; Potts, 2005; Whiting, 2013; Williamson, 2009) hold that the characteristic quality associated with slurring expressions is not a component of their truth-conditional meaning, but is conventionally implicated by their use. Such accounts predict that the characteristic quality will be implicated by the speaker of (1b) and (3a)–(4b)—resulting in pejorative construals—because conventional implicatures project out of both "presupposition holes" like "not" and "presupposition plugs" like "say" (Potts, 2005, p. 38). Similarly, *expressivist* accounts (Jeshion, 2013; Saka, 2007) hold that the characteristic quality consists of the expression of some non-representational attitude such as contempt, separate from the truth conditions. The expressive component is present for uses of slurring expressions as a default, which explains the availability of pejorative construals.

To explain non-pejorative construals, defenders of these accounts appeal to resources external to their theories. Whiting (2013, pp. 371–372) suggests that a sentence like (3a) should be represented with *scare quotes*—devices that serve to "distance oneself from, not *what* is expressed, but *how* it is expressed"—around the slurring expression. While an occurrence of (3a) expresses the contradiction that the speaker is and is not Jewish, Whiting claims that the speaker conversationally implicates the proposition expressed by (7).

7. I am to be referred to as "a Jew", not as "a kike."

Relatedly, Potts (2005) notes that non-pejorative construals occasionally appear to be available but "require heavy emphasis on [the expression associated with the conventional implicature], an indication that they are quotative" (p. 160). Jeshion (2013) analyses non-pejorative construals of sentences like (3a)–(3b) as a "conversational denial of earlier derogatory utterances" of a slurring expression, which "serves to implicitly *mention* them", and which is "typically signaled in spoken discourse with intonation and, in writing, with scare quotes" (p. 254).

The trouble is that no systematic account is given of how scare quotes, heavy emphasis or intonation may lead to the required readings. The proposal we develop holds that occurrences of sentences like (3a) can indeed be used to conversationally implicate propositions similar to the one expressed by (7), and that vocal emphasis plays a role in licencing this implicature; however, it achieves this via a systematic account.

An account that is specifically designed to handle variability is developed in Camp (2013, 2018). Her *dual-act* account holds that uses of slurs "make two distinct, coordinated contributions to a sentence's conventional communicative role: a truth-conditional predication of group membership, and endorsement of a derogating perspective on that group" (2018, p. 30). For pejorative construals, "the predication of group membership alone will be at-issue, and the perspectival commitment will scope out of the compositional construction of at-issue content, to be imputed to the actual speaker" (Ibid., p. 51). Non-pejorative construals, according to Camp, become available under certain conditions. The first condition is when slurring expressions occur in "interpretive" constructions like (4a)–(4b), which involve operators that may "bind the [derogating] perspective" (Ibid.) provided the speaker clearly distances himself from it. The second condition is when the context mandates that "the perspective steps in as the slur's at-issue contribution" in accordance with Gricean pragmatic principles. For example, if it is common knowledge that Isiah is Jewish, then the negation operator in (1b) will "bind the perspective" because the sentence cannot be understood as making an informative contribution otherwise.

This proposed explanation of variability can be implemented only by endorsing the dual-act account, which relies on mechanisms that are absent from standard semantic theories (e.g., bindable "perspectives"). While our proposal will also draw on Gricean principles, it retains compatibility with all accounts of slurring expressions. Moreover, it relies exclusively on mechanisms from standard semantic theories that are required to explain the independent phenomenon of focus.

To our knowledge, all other existing accounts of slurring expressions encounter similar difficulties to the ones outlined in the current section.[3]

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[3]For instance, *presuppositional* accounts (Cepollaro, 2015; Marques & García-Carpintero, 2020; Schlenker, 2007) appear to only predict the availability of pejorative construals of slurring expressions embedded under negations and of non-pejorative construals of those embedded in indirect reports, since the former settings are presupposition "holes" and the

3 | EXPRESSION FOCUS

In Section 4, we show how an analysis of expression focus provides an explanation of variability that is compatible with any account of slurring expressions. The current section supplies background information on focus (Section 3.1) and an account of expression focus (Section 3.2).

3.1 | Overview of focus

A *focused* constituent in an occurrence of a sentence indicates that certain alternatives to that constituent are relevant to the interpretation of the sentence (see Büring, 2016; Kratzer, 1991; Rooth, 1985; Selkirk, 1984). Every occurrence of a sentence has at least one focus, which is generally marked in spoken form by vocal emphasis (more specifically, certain patterns of pitch accents).[4] Where a focus is marked with subscripted square brackets and capitalised syllables are to be read with vocal emphasis, two different choices of focus for the sentence "Jan is Chinese" are as follows:

8. a. [JAN]$_F$ is Chinese.
   b. Jan is [ChiNESE]$_F$.

The choice of focus in (8a) indicates the relevance of alternative individuals who might be Chinese (Joan, Abdi, etc.), whereas (8b) indicates alternative properties that Jan might have (being Norwegian, being Japanese, etc.).

A key function of focus is to connect an occurrence of a sentence with the *question under discussion* ("QUD"; see Ginzburg, 1995; Roberts, 2012) to which it provides an answer. A felicitous use of a sentence should be congruent with the context's QUD. Roughly, an occurrence *s* of a sentence is *congruent* with the QUD expressed by a *wh*-question *q* if we can derive *q* by replacing the focused constituent of *s* with a *wh*-word.[5] Hence (8a) is congruent with the QUD expressed by (9a), unlike (8b), while the opposite is the case for (9b):

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latter are "plugs." Schlenker (2007, p. 239) attributes pejorative construals of indirect reports to slurring expressions' being "shiftable indexicals", and Cepollaro and Thommen (2019) trace non-pejorative construals of negations to metalinguistic uses of negations (see fn. 1 above); yet presuppositional theories would need to provide a systematic account of these phenomena and predict the contexts in which they emerge. Bolinger's (2017) *contrastive choice* account, like our own proposal, purports to explain variability via a pragmatic process compatible with most theories of the semantics of slurring expressions; yet our proposal relies on standard semantic and pragmatic mechanisms (cf., Bolinger's "signal content") and an independently required account of expression focus.

[4]There is debate about exactly which items within a focus must receive a pitch accent in English. We mark minimal accents, and assume that a focus must include the item that carries the clause-final pitch accent. A focus generally cannot include additional items to the right of the clause-final pitch accent, except when those items are already *given* in the context (Büring, 2016, p. 28). Hence the focus of B's utterance may include "Chinese" even though the clause-final pitch accent falls on "not", because "Chinese" is given in a context at which A's utterance has occurred:

A: Jan is [ChiNESE]$_F$.
B: Jan is [NOT Chinese]$_F$.

[5]More technically, congruence holds between formal *focus values* of occurrences of sentences and the meanings of questions (see Krifka, 2001, p. 296). This definition concerns congruent *denotation* QUDs (see below); congruent *expression* QUDs are characterised in Section 3.2.1.

9. a. Who is Chinese?
        8a. $[JAN]_F$ is Chinese.
        8b. # Jan is $[ChiNESE]_F$.
   b. What is Jan?
        8a. # $[JAN]_F$ is Chinese.
        8b. Jan is $[ChiNESE]_F$.

A QUD is *explicit* when a question that expresses that QUD has been stated. Explicit QUDs constrain the choice of focus for occurrences of sentences that are to provide answers. For example, when (9a) is stated, a response of (8a), but not (8b), is felicitous. For contexts without an explicit QUD, we can often reconstruct an *implicit* QUD based on the focus of an occurrence of a sentence. That is, when (8a) is uttered, we can often infer that (9a) gives the implicit QUD.

For (8a) and (8b), the relevant alternatives are individuals and properties, respectively. The *wh*-phrases of questions corresponding to their congruent QUDs also range over individuals and properties. Compare, however, the following uses of focus:

10. a. Grandpa didn't [kick the BUCKet]$_F$, he [passed aWAY]$_F$. (Krifka, 2008, p. 248)
   b. A: Do you really eat rutabaga at Burns suppers?
      B: We only eat [NEEPS]$_F$. (Wedgwood, 2005, p. 20)

In (10a), foci do not seem to be indicating the relevance of alternative properties that Grandpa might have (having been ill, having gone on holiday, etc.). Instead, alternative *expressions* that might be used to convey that Grandpa died ("passed away", "croaked", etc.) seem relevant. This impression is confirmed by the fact that (10a) provides a natural answer to the QUD expressed by (11b), rather than (11a):

11. a. What property does Grandpa have?
   b. What expression is apt for using as part of conveying that Grandpa has the property of having died?[6]

Krifka (2008) therefore distinguishes between *denotation focus* and *expression focus*, where the relevant alternatives are respectively non-linguistic items and linguistic items. Correspondingly, we can distinguish between *denotation QUDs* and *expression QUDs*, which are expressed by questions with *wh*-phrases that range over non-linguistic items and linguistic items, respectively. Most of the literature on focus concerns denotation focus, since our communicative goals typically centre on acquiring information about the world rather than about appropriate language use (Krifka, 2008, p. 249). Nevertheless, any account of communication should include an analysis of expression focus.

Uses of expression focus allow speakers to convey metalinguistic claims without explicitly asserting them. That is, (10a)–(10b) do not seem to *semantically express* propositions about appropriate language use. Crucially, given an appropriate context, *any* sentence may be understood to involve expression focus. For example, while (8b) ("Jan is [ChiNESE]$_F$") is commonly used to provide an answer to the congruent denotation QUD expressed by (9b) ("What is Jan?"), it might also be used to provide an answer to the congruent *expression* QUD given in (12):

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[6](16a) below is a more accurate statement of a QUD to which (10a) provides an answer, for reasons explained in Section 3.2.1. Any occurrence of a sentence that provides an answer to the QUD expressed by (16a) will also provide an answer to the one expressed by (11b).

12. What expression is apt for using as part of conveying that Jan has the property of being Chinese?

Expression focus can therefore be used to explain a range of metalinguistic phenomena, such as metalinguistic negation and metalinguistic negotiation.[7]

We claim that expression focus can also be used to explain variability: Non-pejorative construals arise when embedded slurring expressions receive expression focus. As discussed in Section 2.2, it has been observed that non-pejorative construals require vocal emphasis on the slurring expressions, and appear to involve metalinguistic or mentioned occurrences of slurring expressions. We suggest that the "vocal emphasis" is the pattern of pitch accents used to vocally mark focus, and that the role of expression focus in conveying metalinguistic claims explains the intuition that the slurring expressions are merely mentioned.

3.2 | An account of expression focus

We give a non-technical overview of the formal component of the account of expression focus developed in Mankowitz (2020) (Section 3.2.1). We then discuss the pragmatic component, which supplies a Gricean account of how hearers reconstruct an answer to an explicit or implicit expression QUD (Section 3.2.2).

3.2.1 | The formal component

The formal component defines an *aptness relation*, which holds between an expression e and a proposition p at a circumstance of evaluation i if and only if e is apt for using as part of conveying p at i, relative to contextually relevant standards.[8] Expression QUDs and the metalinguistic propositions used to answer them are formulated in terms of aptness relations between particular expressions and certain non-metalinguistic propositions. For example, (8b) can be used to answer the QUD expressed by (12) (henceforth, we abbreviate "apt for using as part of conveying" as "apt for conveying"):

8b. Jan is [ChiNESE]$_F$.
12. What expression is apt for conveying that Jan has the salient property (i.e., being Chinese)?

Since a felicitous use of a sentence should be congruent with the context's QUD, a notion of congruence for expression QUDs is required. Roughly, an occurrence s of a sentence is *congruent* with the expression QUD expressed by a *wh-question* q if that QUD concerns the aptness of expressions for conveying some non-metalinguistic proposition p, where p is derived by

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[7]See Mankowitz (2020, 2021). *Metalinguistic negation* is a special usage of negation that signals "the speaker's objection to the content or form (phonetic, morphological, syntactic, semantic or pragmatic) associated with a given utterance" (Horn, 1985, p. 122). *Metalinguistic negotiation* is a notion that originates with Plunkett and Sundell (2013), arising when an expression is used in the course of a dispute to communicate information about the appropriate usage of that expression.

[8]Aptness relations are defined without elaborating the complex contextual factors that determine the relevant standards. Such factors might include what is deemed polite, the way that other discourse participants use language, or speakers' further aims. We assume that a non-bigoted discourse participant will believe that the relevant aptness relation fails to hold between any slurring expression and any proposition, unless she takes exceptional contextual factors to be operative (say, the aim of accurately quoting a speaker).

combining the denotations of *s*'s non-focused constituents (possibly excluding some non-focused sentential operators; see below) with a salient non-linguistic item of an appropriate type.[9]

Given a sentence occurrence *s* and a congruent expression QUD, we can reconstruct a meta-linguistic proposition that answers that QUD. Such propositions state that the focused expression stands in the relevant relation to *p*, the relevant non-metalinguistic proposition. For instance, relative to (8b) and (12), we may reconstruct (13):[10]

13. The expression "Chinese" is apt for conveying that Jan has the salient property (i.e., being Chinese).

A complication is that multiple expression QUDs are congruent with an occurrence of any sentence containing at least one *sentential operator*. This is because aptness relations in expression QUDs and metalinguistic propositions can interact with the meanings of such operators. To illustrate, both (14b) and (14c) are congruent with (14a):

14. a. Grandpa didn't [kick the BUCKet]$_F$.
    b. What expression *is apt* for conveying that Grandpa *fails to have* the salient property (i.e., having died)?
    c. What expression *fails to be apt* for conveying that Grandpa *has* the salient property (i.e., having died)?

In (14b), the aptness predicate takes scope over all material derived from the occurrence of (14a). In (14c), the negative operator from (14a) takes scope over the aptness predicate, affecting the way in which an aptness relation contributes to the expression QUD. This flexibility reflects the full range of expression QUDs to which sentences with sentential operators may be used to provide answers. One role of the pragmatic component is to explain how hearers choose between multiple congruent expression QUDs.

3.2.2 | The pragmatic component

The pragmatic component treats assertions as proposals to add information to the *common ground* (Stalnaker, 1978): the propositions mutually accepted by interlocutors at a particular context for the purposes of their conversation. Following a Gricean framework (Grice, 1989;

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[9]Relative to contexts where we are fairly sure what the salient non-linguistic item will be, we can represent the expression QUD and metalinguistic proposition by specifying this item. For most ordinary contexts, the salient item will be the denotation of the focused expression. A simpler proposal—where the non-metalinguistic proposition is derived by combining the denotations of the non-focused *and focused* expressions—is unable to handle certain unusual cases.

[10]*Expression focus values* and QUDs are formalised within a structured meaning framework (von Stechow, 1981); *s* and *q* are congruent if the first elements of their structured meanings are identical. For instance, (12) and (13) are respectively formalised as follows, where $\mathcal{U}$ is a variable that receives a value from the domain D_u of linguistic items (see Potts, 2007), $[\![SAL(\mathcal{U})]\!]_c$ is a salient item in the domain corresponding to the semantic type specified in the output of the grammar $[\![\mathcal{U}]\!]_c$ (here, an item in $D_{\langle e,t\rangle}$), and $\ulcorner chinese \urcorner$ is a linguistic item:

$$\langle [\)]]\!]_c, D_u \rangle.$$
$$\langle [\)]]\!]_c, \ulcorner chinese \urcorner \rangle.$$

Levinson, 2000), cooperative discourse is claimed to be governed by *maxims* requiring speakers to convey only what is informative, relevant, true and so forth. Speakers may exploit assumed adherence to maxims in order to *conversationally implicate* propositions other than those expressed by their utterances.

The pragmatic component holds that occurrences of sentences may be used to conversationally implicate answers to congruent expression QUDs, both explicit and implicit. This process is simplest for contexts where a sentence occurrence s is congruent with some *explicit* expression QUD Q, but the proposition p expressed by s does not provide a felicitous answer to Q. Then, hearers can reason as follows:

Reasoning with an explicit QUD:
  i. A speaker who was proposing to add p to the common ground would violate the maxim of relation ("Be relevant").
  ii. The apparent violation can be resolved by supposing that the speaker thinks that p', a metalinguistic proposition reconstructed from s that answers Q.[11]

This reasoning allows p' to be added to the common ground, provided that this does not entail that the speaker has violated other maxims. For example, when (15a) is issued in response to an explicit utterance of (11b), (15b) may be added to the common ground as an answer:

11b. What expression is apt for conveying that Grandpa has the property of having died?

15. a. Grandpa [passed aWAY]$_F$.
    b. The expression "passed away" is apt for conveying that Grandpa has the property of having died.

Matters are more complicated for contexts without explicit QUDs. Recall that a sentence occurrence s with a given choice of focus is congruent with a denotation QUD and at least one expression QUD. A hearer must first infer that the speaker is intending to provide an answer to an implicit expression QUD. If s includes at least one sentential operator, then the hearer must additionally identify exactly which congruent expression QUD the speaker intends to address. The pragmatic component holds that hearers initially assume that s is being used to answer a denotation QUD, because denotation focus generally plays a more important role in communication. Assessors reconsider this assumption when they infer that the speaker is unlikely to be using s for this purpose. They will often form this inference when a speaker's proposing to add the proposition p expressed by s to the common ground would violate a maxim of *Quantity* (e. g., "Make your contribution as informative as is required (for the current purposes of the exchange)"; Grice, 1989, p. 26) or *Quality* (e.g., "Do not say what you believe to be false"; Ibid.). The hearer may then reason as follows:

Reasoning without an explicit QUD:
  i. A speaker who was proposing to add p to the common ground would violate a maxim of Quantity or Quality.

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[11]Informally, the reconstruction is as described in Section 3.2.1. Formally, p' is derived by applying the first member of the appropriate expression focus value of s to the additional members of that focus value.

ii. The apparent violation can be resolved by supposing that the speaker thinks that p', where p' is a metalinguistic proposition reconstructed from s that answers some expression QUD Q congruent with s, and where the speaker is plausibly attempting to answer Q with p'.[12]

Again, this reasoning process allows p' to be added to the common ground, provided that this does not violate other conversational maxims.

For example, when (10a) is issued without an explicit QUD, hearers will infer that the speaker does not intend to add the contradiction it expresses—that Grandpa did not die and Grandpa died—since this would violate the first maxim of Quantity. Instead, hearers infer that the speaker intends to answer a congruent *expression* QUD. While the negation operator means that there will be multiple candidates for such QUDs and corresponding answers, hearers will normally reason that the most plausible candidates are those expressed by (16a) and (16b):

10a. Grandpa didn't [kick the BUCKet]$_F$, he [passed aWAY]$_F$.

16. a. What expression fails to be apt for conveying that Grandpa has the salient property (i.e., having died), and what expression is apt for conveying that Grandpa has the salient property?
    b. The expression "kick the bucket" fails to be apt for conveying that Grandpa has the salient property, and the expression "passed away" is apt.

4 | EXPLAINING VARIABILITY

This section outlines our proposal: Non-pejorative construals of slur-embedding sentences involve metalinguistic propositions that are conversationally implicated during the kinds of process described in Section 3.2. First, we discuss the contextual features that must be assumed if the reasoning process is to be initiated (Section 4.1). Next, we illustrate the process for particular examples, describing which maxims risk being violated (Section 4.2) and how a particular metalinguistic proposition is reconstructed (Section 4.3). We end by summarising how our proposal predicts and explains variability (Section 4.4).

4.1 | Contextual prerequisites

One might wonder how the reasoning process described in Section 3.2 could apply to a sentence presented out of context. The process requires a choice of focus, and can only take place relative to common grounds. In fact, there is good evidence that every assessor of an out-of-context sentence assigns it a choice of focus (see Breen, 2015) and evaluates it relative to an imaginary context that includes at least a congruent QUD (see van Berkum et al., 1999). There is some evidence that each sentence structure has a default focus choice, and that assessors are likely to assign this focus for sentences presented out of context (see Carlson et al., 2009), but we leave open the possibility that assessors can assign non-default or arbitrary choices of focus.

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[12]The second conjunct ensures that, when there are multiple congruent QUDs due to the interaction of aptness relations and the meanings of sentential operators, hearers will use contextual clues to select the most plausible QUD and corresponding full answer.

Henceforth, we restrict our attention to cases where assessors take focus to fall on slurring expressions. We predict that an assessor who chooses an alternative focus for sentences like (1b) and (3a)–(4b) will not proceed further with the reasoning process. Once a choice of focus has been made, an assessor assumes by default that the sentence is being used to answer a congruent *denotation* QUD. We take it that assessors often imagine a context that includes information additional to a congruent QUD, either spontaneously or on the basis of explicit or implicit clues about the intended context. Such additional information might consist of imaginary discourse participants or propositions present in the common ground.

4.2 | Maxim violations

The next two sections illustrate the reasoning process for occurrences of (1b), (3a) and (4a) where the slurring expressions are focused:

> 1b′. Isiah is not [a KIKE]$_F$.
> 3a′. I'm not [a KIKE]$_F$, I'm [a JEW]$_F$.
> 4a′. Eric said that [a BITCH]$_F$ ran for President of the United States in 2008.

We consider the conditions under which a speaker would risk violating a Gricean maxim in uttering these sentences to answer their congruent denotation QUDs, which are given by the following:

> 17. a. What property does Isiah fail to have?
>   b. What property does the speaker fail to have, and what property does the speaker have?
>   c. An individual with what property did Eric say ran for President of the United States in 2008?

First, a proposal to add the proposition expressed by (1b) to a common ground would violate a maxim if that common ground already includes the proposition that Isiah is Jewish (cf., Camp, 2018, pp. 54–55). This is because most accounts of slurring expressions hold that the proposition expressed by an occurrence of (1b) contradicts the proposition that Isiah is Jewish. Hence using (1b) to answer the QUD given by (17a) would be a proposal to add a proposition accepted as false by discourse participants, violating the first maxim of Quality ("Do not say what you believe to be false"; Grice, 1989, p. 26).

Second, a proposal to add the proposition expressed by (3a) to a common ground would always violate the first maxim of Quantity ("Make your contribution as informative as is required (for the current purposes of the exchange)"; Ibid.). This is because most accounts of slurring expressions take an occurrence of (3a) to express a contradiction, which rational speakers recognise can never be informative.[13]

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[13]The situation is similar for the few accounts denying that slurring expressions have the same extensions as neutral counterparts (e.g., Bach, 2018; Hom & May, 2013). First, the proposition expressed by (1b) would be an uninformative contribution that violates the first maxim of Quantity whenever the common ground includes the proposition that it is not the case that Isiah ought to be the target of negative moral evaluation because of being Jewish. Second, the proposition expressed by an occurrence of (3a) would violate the first maxim of Quantity relative to a common ground that includes the proposition that the speaker is Jewish or the proposition that it is not the case that the speaker ought to be the target of negative moral evaluation because of being Jewish.

Third, a proposal to add the proposition expressed by (4a) to a common ground would violate a maxim if that common ground already includes the information that Eric expressed the relevant proposition. This is because the proposition expressed by (4a) would then violate the first maxim of Quantity.

By assessing (1b)′–(4a)′ relative to the described common grounds, an individual carries out step (i) of the reasoning process outlined in Section 3.2.2. The likelihood that an assessor will evaluate an out-of-context sentence relative to an imaginary common ground for which maxim violations are threatened varies according to the particular sentence. Any occurrence of a negation with correction like (3a) would violate the first maxim of Quantity relative to any common ground, at least for those who take it to express a contradiction. An assessor need not assume a context with more than a congruent denotation QUD and rational discourse participants in order to appreciate this fact. Slightly richer common grounds must be imagined if maxim violations are to be threatened by uses of negations without correction like (1b) and indirect reports like (4a). The relevant richer common ground would often be a fairly natural one for an assessor to envisage. Moreover, even if an assessor does not imagine a common ground where maxim violations are threatened, she might imagine one where broader reasons make it implausible that a speaker would be using the sentence to answer the congruent denotation QUD.[14] Still, our account predicts that the process necessary for accessing a metalinguistic proposition is more likely to be initiated for assessments of (3a)–(3b) than for (1b) and (4a)–(4b).

4.3 | Reconstructing metalinguistic propositions

Having completed step (i) of the reasoning process, an assessor of (1b)′–(4a)′ works through step (ii) of the process specific to contexts without an explicit QUD, repeated here:

(ii) The apparent violation can be resolved by supposing that the speaker thinks that p', where p' is a metalinguistic proposition reconstructed from s that answers some expression QUD Q congruent with s, and where the speaker is plausibly attempting to answer Q with p'.

The presence of one sentential operator in each of (1b)′–(4a)′ means that there are two pairs of candidates for Q and p'. An assessor must identify a pair such that it is plausible to suppose that the speaker is attempting to address Q and thinks that p' is the full answer. We give the candidates for each occurrence in turn, and describe how assessors exploit contextual clues.[15]

1b′.
    a. **Q candidate:** What expression *fails to be apt* for conveying that Isiah *has* the property of being Jewish?
    p′ candidate: The expression "kike" *fails to be apt* for conveying that Isiah *has* the property of being Jewish.

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[14]For instance, a speaker addressing the denotation QUD given by (17c) ("An individual with what property did Eric say ran for President of the United States in 2008?") would need to know that Eric said that an individual with some property ran for President of the United States in 2008. An assessor might regard it as relatively unlikely that a speaker could know this without knowing the relevant property.

[15]We assume that an assessor will imagine contexts where the property associated with the focused slurring expression is the salient property, as is ordinarily the case (see fn. 9).

  b. **Q candidate:** What expression *is apt* for conveying that Isiah *fails to have* the property of being Jewish?
  p′ candidate: The expression "kike" *is apt* for conveying that Isiah *fails to have* the property of being Jewish.

Relative to the common ground described in Section 4.2, the most plausible candidates are those in (a): for a speaker is unlikely to believe that it is important to settle the question of which expression is apt for conveying that Isiah *fails to have* the property of being Jewish when the common ground includes the information that Isiah *is* Jewish.[16]

Next, consider the negation with correction:

3a′.
  a. **Q candidate**: What expression *fails to be apt* for conveying that the speaker *has* the property of being Jewish, and what expression is apt for conveying that the speaker has the property of being Jewish?
  p′ candidate: The expression "kike" *fails to be apt* for conveying that the speaker *has* the property of being Jewish, and the expression "Jew" is apt for conveying that the speaker has the property of being Jewish.
  b. **Q candidate**: What expression *is apt* for conveying that the speaker *fails to have* the property of being Jewish, and what expression is apt for conveying that the speaker has the property of being Jewish?
  p′ candidate: The expression "kike" *is apt* for conveying that the speaker *fails to have* the property of being Jewish, and the expression "Jew" is apt for conveying that the speaker has the property of being Jewish.

The most natural candidates are those in (a): Competent English speakers are unlikely to believe that the expression "kike" is apt for conveying that individuals *fail to be* Jewish whereas the expression "Jew" is apt for conveying that individuals *are* Jewish.

Finally, consider the indirect report:

4a′.
  a. **Q candidate**: What expression *did Eric say is apt* for conveying that a woman ran for President (of the United States in 2008)?
  p′ candidate: *Eric said that* the expression "bitch" *is apt* for conveying that a woman ran for President.[17]

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[16]For the candidates in (b) to be plausible, the common ground would need to already include the proposition that Isiah *is not* Jewish. Then, a bigoted speaker who believes that the expression "kike" is apt for conveying propositions denying (and, presumably, affirming) that individuals are Jewish might issue (1b)′:

  A. Isiah is not a Jew; he's a Christian.
  B. Isiah is not [a KIKE]*F*.

If an assessor considers (1b) relative to this sort of common ground, then a reasoning process initiated by the apparent violation of the first maxim of Quantity may lead her to infer that the speaker implicated candidate (b).

[17]One might wonder whether ordinary speakers take an occurrence of the *p′* candidate in (a) to be true if Eric only uttered:

  i. A bitch ran for President of the United States in 2008.

b. **Q candidate:** What expression *is apt* for conveying that *Eric said that* a woman ran for President?

p′ candidate: The expression "bitch" *is apt* for conveying that *Eric said that* a woman ran for President.

The most plausible candidates are those in (a): for a speaker is fairly unlikely to believe that the expression "bitch" is apt for conveying what Eric said and that using an indirect report with expression focus is the most effective way to communicate this view.[18]

If an assessor of each of (1b)′–(4a)′ carries out step (ii) as described, then the assessor is likely to add to the imaginary common ground the implicit expression QUD and corresponding proposition given in (a). These metalinguistic propositions are indicative of non-bigoted attitudes: They state that a slurring expression *fails to be apt* for conveying certain content or that *a reported speaker said that it was apt* for conveying certain content. In contrast, the metalinguistic propositions given in (b) may provide evidence of bigoted attitudes: They state that slurring expressions *are apt* for conveying particular propositions.

Despite the fact that the candidates in (a) are more natural than those in (b), it is easier to imagine contexts where the candidates in (b) are plausible for negations without correction like (1b) (see fn. 16) and indirect reports like (4a) (see fn. 18) than it is in the case of negations with correction like (3a).

4.4 | Explaining variability

According to our proposal, the non-pejorative construals of sentences with embedded slurring expressions like (1b)–(4b) arise when assessors work through the reasoning process described in Sections 4.1–4.3. As a result, the assessor takes the (real or imaginary) speaker to have conversationally implicated a metalinguistic proposition about the aptness of using the slurring

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Two considerations support an affirmative answer. First, while there is ongoing debate about the truth conditions of indirect reports, the notion of *commitment* often plays a role. Camp (2006) writes "it is normally only appropriate to report speakers as having 'said' contents to which they have *openly and obviously* committed themselves by their utterance" (p. 286), where some of the commitments "concern appropriate affective attitudes, or the appropriate manner of speaking" (p. 306). By uttering (i), Eric appears to have openly committed himself to the proposition that the expression "bitch" is apt for conveying the information in question. Second, it would seem unreasonable for Eric to respond to the indirect report by uttering "I said that a bitch ran for President of the United States in 2008, I didn't say anything about whether the expression 'bitch' is apt", and Abreu Zavaleta (2019, pp. 2141–2142) takes this outcome to indicate that the indirect report is likely to be true.

[18]For the candidates in (b) to be plausible, the reporter must either believe that "bitch" is the apt expression for referring to women or that it is the apt expression for conveying the exact words used by Eric. Such a context is easier to imagine for the following:

A. Eric said that a woman ran for President of the United States in 2008.
B. Eric said that [a BITCH]$_F$ ran for President.

Such contexts are fairly unusual: A reporter with the first belief would achieve the same effect by simply using "bitch" to refer to women (e.g., by following A's utterance with "I can hardly believe a bitch ran for President"), and a reporter with the second belief would be more likely to overtly quote "bitch." This reduces the likelihood that an assessor would imagine such a context.

expression. The implicated proposition indicates a non-bigoted attitude, insofar as it does not state that the slurring expression *is* apt.

Our account predicts the availability of non-pejorative construals for occurrences of sentences that, firstly, contain at least one sentential operator and, secondly, allow some metalinguistic proposition to be reconstructed that is both non-pejorative and plausibly intended by the speaker of some contexts. For without a sentential operator, the only metalinguistic propositions that can be reconstructed will state that a slurring expression *is apt* for conveying a proposition, which will ordinarily be indicative of bigoted attitudes; and if the only metalinguistic propositions that can be reconstructed from the sentence are indicative of bigoted attitudes or are not plausibly intended by any rational speaker, then an assessor would be unable to access a non-pejorative construal via the pragmatic process.

Our proposal has a number of appealing features. First, it issues predictions about whether non-pejorative construals will be accessed in real contexts, and about the conditions that must hold for an assessor of an out-of-context sentence to access a non-pejorative construal. It also attributes differences in the perceived availability of non-pejorative construals for out-of-context sentences to the ease with which the reasoning process is initiated and completed. According to most accounts of slurring expressions, uses of negations with correction threaten the violation of maxims for *any* common ground, whereas uses of negations without correction and indirect reports threaten to violate maxims only relative to common grounds with certain additional features (see Section 4.2). This makes it more likely that an assessor will imagine a common ground that causes the reasoning process to be initiated with sentences of the former kind. Moreover, it is difficult to imagine contexts where a metalinguistic proposition indicative of bigoted attitudes was intended in the case of negations with corrections, whereas it is slightly easier to imagine such contexts for negations without correction and indirect reports (see Section 4.3). This makes it more likely that an assessor will use the reasoning process to reconstruct a metalinguistic proposition indicative of a non-bigoted attitude with sentences of the former kind. These factors explain the widely held intuition that non-pejorative construals of negations with correction are more readily available than those of negations without correction and indirect reports.

A second appealing feature is that our proposal is compatible with all accounts of slurring expressions.[19] Finally, our proposal relies on independently motivated mechanisms. Since a complete account of communication requires an account of expression focus anyway, those who develop analyses of slurring expressions can endorse our explanation of variability without incurring any new commitments.

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[19]While our proposal is compatible with semantic accounts, they have less incentive to endorse it. Semantic accounts take occurrences of sentences with slurring expressions embedded under negation to express non-pejorative, non-metalinguistic propositions; hence variability requires them to explain the availability of *pejorative* construals. Our solution does not help with this task, but instead delivers an additional non-pejorative construal consisting of a metalinguistic proposition. Advocates of semantic accounts nevertheless experience pressure to grant the availability of these metalinguistic propositions, at least if they accept that expression focus is a real phenomenon.

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