

SLURS AND THE FACT/VALUE DIVIDE

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ABSTRACT

Theories of slurs mostly fall into two camps. According to conjunctivists, uses of slurs conventionally perform two distinct speech acts. The first is a non-derogatory act of referring to a kind, and the second is a non-referential act of derogation. The first act is also performed by their neutral counterparts. Minimalists, by contrast, think that uses of slurs conventionally perform the non-derogatory act of referring associated with their neutral counterparts, and that it all. I argue against both these approaches, by demonstrating that they fail to capture the full range of slurs' occurrences. I focus on three important cases: (i) a bigot's use of slurs, (ii) their (non-reclaimed) use by slurs' targets, and (iii) the use of slurs in quotational contexts. I develop a novel and deflationary semantics for slurs that occupies a space between conjunctivism and minimalism, according to which uses of slurs conventionally perform a *single* act of derogatory reference. This view bucks the orthodoxy in maintaining that the meanings of slurs do not divide along fact/value lines. Interestingly, this is for reasons that don't apply to 'thick' terms, like 'brave' and 'wanton'.

Recent years have seen a proliferation of work on slurs. According to what I call conjunctivism, slurs' meanings divide into two separable semantic components, the first of which is purely descriptive and the second of which is non-evaluative. In this respect, they are taken to resemble phrases like 'is Black and contemptible', utterances of which conventionally perform two distinct speech acts. The first is a non-derogatory act of referring to a kind, associated with their neutral counterparts,¹ and the second is a non-referential act of derogation. Opinions have diverged among conjunctivists over the relation of these components, as well as the nature of the derogatory conjunct. Minimalists, by contrast, maintain that uses of slurs only conventionally perform the non-derogatory act of referring associated with their neutral counterparts. On this view, there is no semantic difference between the N-word and 'Black'. The derogation that slurs perform has to be understood extra-semantically.

¹ A slur's neutral counterpart is a non-derogatory word that is co-extensive with it.

In this paper, I argue against these two dominant approaches to slurs, by demonstrating that they fail to account for the full range of uses that slurs are put to. I consider three important cases: (i) a bigot's use of slurs, (ii) their (non-reclaimed) use by slurs' targets, and (iii) the use of slurs in quotational contexts. No account paints a plausible picture of every case. I detail these objections in §1 and §2, before turning to an alternative account of slurs' semantics in §3. This alternative occupies a space between minimalism and conjunctivism, and avoids the charges against them. According to it, uses of slurs conventionally perform a *single* locutionary act that is at once both referential and derogatory. This view entails, against the orthodoxy, that the meanings of slurs do not admit of a fact/value divide, despite being both descriptive and evaluative. Interestingly, this is for reasons that don't apply to 'thick' words like 'wanton' and 'brave'. The manner of slurs' descriptive and evaluative entanglement is distinctive.

Although the following ideas apply to slurs general, I will use the N-word (with its 'er' ending) as a representative example. This is because it is an unfortunately familiar slur, with a well-known euphemism (sc. 'the N-word') that makes it easy to avoid displaying it. By a 'slur', I mean a derogatory kind-term. The N-word, the C-word, 'K***', 'cracker', 'nag', 'cur', and so on are all examples. This use of the word 'slur' probably comes apart from ordinary usage. For instance, it is sometimes said that 'cracker' is not a slur, because it is not possible for an oppressed group to slur their oppressors. It has also been suggested that words are only slurs when their targets are inappropriate objects of derogation. On my quasi-technical use of 'slur', these claims are false. As I see things, the obvious differences between the N-word and 'cracker' are due to extra-semantic facts about their respective histories, users and targets. The differences between them are not indicative of fundamentally different semantic mechanisms.

1. CONJUNCTIVISM

1.1 CONJUNCTIVISM

According to conjunctivism, utterances of slurs perform two distinct speech acts as a matter of their conventional linguistic meanings.² The first is a non-derogatory act of referring to a social kind, and the second is a non-referential act of derogation. Characterising the meanings of slurs means giving a specification of both sorts of act.³ In what follows, it will be important to distinguish clearly between *actions* and *act-types*. I follow Jennifer Hornsby in using ‘action’ only to refer to particular concrete token events, and ‘act’ only to refer to the universals that they instantiate (Hornsby 1988). Acts are performed; actions are the concrete performances of them. (I will also follow Hornsby in italicizing references to acts.) Conjunctivist theories do not take a stance on how many actions are constituted by uttering a slur. Instead, they treat utterances of slurs as falling under two distinct *acts* as a matter of their conventional linguistic meanings. Take the toy conjunctivist view that calling someone the N-word amounts to saying ‘So-and-so is Black and contemptible’. According to it, the meaning of the slur is such that using it constitutes a performance of the acts *categorizing as Black*, and *describing as contemptible*. These acts are obviously distinct, since it is possible to perform one without performing the other. How many actions are thereby performed is another matter, and not obviously settled by the view’s stated commitments.

² Conjunctivist theories should not be confused with Elizabeth Camp’s ‘two-factor’ views, which make up a subset of the former (Camp 2018). ‘Two-factor’ views attribute two distinct illocutionary acts to uses of slurs, one truth-conditional and at-issue, and the other not. Camp contrasts these with ‘univocal’ views, which treat uses of slurs as contributing a single (possibly complex) truth-conditional content. Both ‘two-factor’ and ‘univocal’ views are instances of what I am calling ‘conjunctivism’.

³ In §2, I turn to minimalism. Minimalists also think that uses of slurs perform referential and derogatory acts, but they do not think that the latter is performed as a matter of slurs’ conventional linguistic meanings.

Recent years have seen a proliferation of conjunctivist theories. Using the N-word has been said to categorize subjects as Black, while being a conventional means of either: (a) offering a parenthetical side-remark to the effect that Black people are contemptible for being Black (Bach 2018); (b) attributing a set of negative stereotypical features to Black people, while prescribing their ill-treatment (Hom 2008; Hom and May 2013); (c) triggering an offensive conventional implicature to the effect that Black people are [*insert specific racist stereotypes*] (Williamson 2009; Whiting 2013); (d) communicating an evaluative presupposition to the effect that Black people are bad (Cepollaro 2020); (e) expressing the speaker's contempt for Black people (Jeshion 2013a; 2017; 2018; Potts 2007; Schlenker 2007); (f) signaling the speaker's allegiance to a bigoted perspective (Camp 2013; 2018); (g) directing one's audience to take up a bigoted perspective on Black people (Kirk-Giannini 2019); and more.

Conjunctivists associate slurs with specific moral attitudes, stereotypes, bigoted perspectives, and so on, in an attempt to give a substantive explanation of slurs' derogation. For instance, according to Bach, uses of slurs derogate the target group *because* they attribute the property of contemptibility to them, and according to Camp, it is *because* they signal bigoted perspectives. These constitute genuine explanations because the notions employed – 'contempt', 'perspective', etc. – are intelligible independently of knowing what a slur is. In this way, conjunctivists have endeavoured to (in some sense) analyze 'slur'. This differs from the task of analyzing specific slurs, like the N-word. For instance, although Camp thinks that the N-word is unparaphrasable,⁴ she does think that we can give an informative explanation of what a slur is. We

⁴ Camp's says that there does not seem to be any special propositional content that the N-word encodes, a fact that comes out in the 'ellipses, hedges, and other markers of approximation' that accompany attempts to capture the slur's putative truth-conditional content (Camp 2013, 335). According to Camp, the point of the slur is to signal one's allegiance to an amorphous and bigoted perspective, which is best thought of as a '[tool] for thought rather than thoughts *per se*' (ibid. 336).

can think of her as saying ‘The conventional meaning of a slur dictates that its uses do X’, where ‘X’ is cashed out in terms that are independent of, and in some sense prior to the word ‘slur’. She presumably doesn’t intend this as a conceptual analysis, but it is supposed to specify independently intelligible necessary (if not sufficient) conditions for being a slur.

1.2 OBJECTION ONE: THE WHITE SUPREMACIST

Conjunctivists face two simple objections. First, consider an offensive use of the N-word: for instance, the venomous spitting out of ‘S is a N*****’ by a card-carrying White supremacist. The conjunctivist tells us that this utterance offends on account of doing X, where X is one of the candidates listed above. Given this explanatory agenda, consistency *prima facie* requires that the conjunctivist must hold of *any* vehicle for performing X that it is no less offensive than the cited remark. For instance, if Kent Bach is right in his analysis of the N-word, utterances of ‘S is Black (and by the way, Black people are contemptible for being Black)’ ought to be no less derogatory than ‘S is a N*****’, as uttered by the White supremacist.⁵ Similarly, if Jeshion is right, it ought to be possible to effect the speaker’s pejorative impact by saying ‘S is fucking Black’, where the expletive serves as a vehicle for the expression of her contempt. Likewise, conventional implicature accounts like that in (c) predict that such uses of the N-word are no more offensive than saying ‘S is Black, and Black people are [*insert anti-Black stereotypes*]’. After all, explicitly

⁵ In Bach’s case, he does give us a rough conceptual analysis of specific slurs, in the more or less traditional sense of that term. He tells us that ‘S is a N*****’ is semantically equivalent to ‘S is Black (and by the way, Black people are contemptible for being Black)’, and although he does not explicitly state which notion of ‘semantic equivalence’ concerns him, he must mean, in giving his account, that slur-users describe Black people *as* contemptible, in using the slur, and not just that they attribute a property that is truth-conditionally equivalent to, or co-intensional with, the property of *being contemptible*. (Bach uses the word ‘contemptible’ as a stand-in for an only partially specified disjunctive property; it is sense that the conceptual analysis is ‘rough’.) After all, we cannot infer from the fact that a property P is (necessarily) co-extensive with the property of being contemptible that attributions of P are themselves derogatory. Thus, insofar as Bach intends his analysis to expose the source of the slur’s derogatory force, he must intend it as being more or less synonymous with, i.e., a translation of, the target sentence. The same goes for the views in (b) and (c).

asserting the derogatory content of a conventional implicature can only be more offensive than merely implicating it. As (Rappaport 2020) notes, these implications strike us as wrong. Contrary to Blackburn's suggestion that the White supremacist can do without the slur, by 'playing [its] information in neutral terms but to the contempt conveying tune' (Blackburn 1992, 290), it is simply not as bad to perform the derogatory acts specified by these theories than it is for the White supremacist to use the N-word.

Cameron Kirk-Giannini makes a similar point in respect of Camp's perspectivalism. He constructs a hypothetical scenario in which an utterance of 'I recently moved to Andropolis' conveys the information that its speaker endorses a misogynistic perspective of the kind identified by Camp as encoded by the C-word (Kirk-Giannini 2019). As he points out,

if the offensiveness of [the slur] were traceable to what it reveals about the speaker's perspectives or attitudes [per Camp's suggestion], we would expect [this utterance], which [reveals] exactly the same information about [the speaker's] perspectives and attitudes, to be offensive to the same extent' (Kirk-Giannini 2019, 6)

The fact is that we do not. Utterances of 'I recently moved to Andropolis', whatever information they convey, are not as offensive as a misogynist's utterance of the C-word.⁶

Now, this objection is by no means knockdown, and on one way of taking it, it is simply a request for more to be said. Certainly, it does not *falsify* the claims made by conjunctivists about slurs' semantics. It does not establish that the N-word is not e.g., as Jeshion thinks, a vehicle for

⁶ You might think that some of these are offensive to the same extent as using the N-word. If that is your reaction, try replacing 'Black' in the proposed analysis with the N-word. A contemptuous utterance of 'So-and-so is fucking Black' is bad, but a contemptuous utterance of 'So-and-so is a fucking N*****' is obviously worse.

expressing the speaker's contempt. Rather, it poses a challenge to the assertion, implicitly made by Jeshion on the view's behalf, that slurs offend *because* they are vehicles for expressing contempt. This claim raises the question why the White supremacist's use of the N-word should be so much more offensive than his contemptuously-voiced utterance of 'S is fucking Black', if Jeshion is right. There are various things that Jeshion can say here, and there is always the option of appealing to pragmatic considerations in order to explain the discrepancy between the two. However, on another way of taking the objection, the discrepancy between them speaks not to the fact that conjunctivists haven't said enough, but to the fact that they have attributed the wrong *kind* of derogatory act to uses of slurs. From this perspective, the reason that the White supremacist's use of the N-word is so much more offensive than his contemptuous utterance of 'S is fucking Black' is that the N-word does not serve as a vehicle for the speaker's contempt. This hypothesis is bolstered by the second objection to which I now turn.

1.3 OBJECTION TWO: BLACK USERS OF THE N-WORD

The second objection is a criticism of the fact that conjunctivists (and philosophers more generally) have tended to focus on a certain kind of slur-use, and slur-user. They have focused on the kind of occurrence discussed above, in which the N-word is used as a weapon of verbal abuse by card-carrying White supremacists.⁷ While any theory of slurs should account for these uses and the harm they cause, it is one use amongst others. I am not referring to Christopher Hom's 'NDNA' uses which should, I think, be glossed metalinguistically.⁸ Rather, I have in mind the fact that the

⁷ Elizabeth Camp and Jen Foster also note and object to this prejudice (Camp 2013; Foster Forthcoming). However, they do not obviously have in view the kind of use that this section discusses.

⁸ An example of an NDNA use is an utterance of 'Institutions that treat Chinese people as chinks are racist' (Hom 2008, 429). I disagree with (Torrengo 2020), and side with (Belleri 2020; Cepollaro and Thommen 2019; Mankowitz and Shaw 2022), in glossing these metalinguistically.

N-word is put to use by members of the Black community, and not always as a reclaimed term. For instance, I have been told that Black people sometimes use the N-word as a term of disapprobation for one another. One Black friend specifically recalled her mother's use of the slur to scold her and her siblings when they were children. A different sort of example is found in the work and speech of James Baldwin. Consider his employment of the slur in the following excerpts from his interviews with Kenneth Clark (1963) and Dick Cavett (1969):⁹

What White people have to do, is try to find out in their own hearts why it was necessary for them to have a nigger in the first place. Because I am not a nigger. I'm a man. But if you think I'm a nigger, it means you need him...If I'm not the nigger here, and if you invented him, you the White people invented him, then you got to find out why. And the future of the country depends on that. Whether or not it is able to ask that question.¹⁰ (Clark)

If any White man in the world says give me liberty or give me death, the entire white world applauds. When a Black man says exactly the same thing – word for word – he is judged a criminal and treated like one, and everything possible is done to make an example of this bad nigger so there won't be any more like him. (Cavett)

[The police] are a very real menace to every Black cat in this country...I'm not really helpless. But I know, too, that if [the policeman] don't know that this is Jimmy Baldwin

⁹ For the full interviews see https://openvault.wgbh.org/catalog/V_C03ED1927DCF46B5A8C82275DF4239F9 and <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=WWwOi17WHpE>, respectively.

¹⁰ Eleanor Neufeld has interpreted this remark as raising questions specific to the N-word (Neufeld 2019). However, it is, I think, to be heard as an enjoinder to White people to scrutinize their reasons for dividing populations into White and Black in the first instance. It is the 'invention' of Black people as a social kind that is under interrogation.

and not just some other nigger, he's gonna blow my head off just like blows off everybody else's head. (Clark)

There is no pre-theoretic reason to think that the N-word does not occur on Black peoples' lips in its ordinary, referential use. There is no reason to gloss such occurrences metalinguistically, or to think of their uses as non-literal. On the contrary, the N-word is often at home in their mouths as any other. Only someone who antecedently thought of the N-word as e.g., expressive of speaker contempt could be tempted to explain this fact away as mere appearance. Obviously, a Black person's use of the slur is rarely as offensive as the White supremacist's, and this difference should be accounted for. Some Black people are nonetheless users of the word, no less than White people. I assume that conjunctivists have tended to overlook this because they, for the most part at least, 'have no trace of a tendency to use [the word]' (Hornsby 2001, 129).

The objection to conjunctivism is simply put. While Baldwin and my Black friend's mother used the N-word, do we want to say that in doing so, they described Black people as contemptible, that they endorsed racist stereotypes about them, that they expressed their feelings of contempt towards them, that they signaled their allegiances to a bigoted perspective, or in general, that they did any of the things that conjunctivists would have them do? Presumably not! This complaint is related to a remark of Hornsby's. Objecting to Richard Hare's view, according to which someone who calls x the N-word (i) says that x is Black and (ii) condemns those who are Black, Hornsby writes:

The underlying problem comes to the surface when we recognize how much else there is, besides condemning, that may be done with derogatory words. Consider that a derogatory

word can be used both in addressing someone to whom its neutral counterpart applies, and in addressing someone to whom it does not. In the first case, the word on one occasion might be used insultingly, on another, evincing deep hostility. In the second case, the word might on one occasion be used unconsciously to make a snub, on another, evincing solidarity with the intended audience. These various things – insulting, vilifying, snubbing, registering solidarity – surely cannot all be explained as spin-offs from a blanket condemnation that it is the word’s secondary purpose to effect (*loc. cit.*).

The ‘underlying problem’ that Hornsby identifies is that associating slurs with illocutionary acts like condemnation makes little sense of their illocutionary diversity. As she notes, the condemnation of Black people is not even always at issue when the word is used by White people. In many cases, the point of the word is to register their solidarity with other White people more than it is to perform acts of condemnation. Geoff Nunberg makes a similar point: ‘Adolescent boys who throw the word *fag* around loosely aren’t focused on disparaging homosexual men as such so much as communing with each other over their own macho heterosexuality’ (Nunberg 2018, 53-4). Turning to the word’s use by Black people, Hornsby’s point is yet more evident. While the Black mother scolds her child, neither she nor Baldwin perform a blanket condemnation of Black people. In Baldwin’s case, the only illocutionary act that he goes in for in the passages above is *assertion*.

It might be responded that Baldwin’s use of the N-word invariably appears in scare-quotes. It is an under-theorized question what scare-quoting amounts to, but it typically involves putting the word to its usual use, while expressing some sort of reservation about one’s employment of it. The nature of this reservation varies. Sometimes, scare-quoting signals a speaker’s preference for

another word/description (e.g., ‘the (co-called) “problem” with X...’); sometimes, it records the speaker’s objection to a concept’s existence (‘If it is “blasphemous” to X, then this story is’); sometimes, it signals that one doesn’t know what a word means (‘If that isn’t “arthritis”, neither is that’); and sometimes it blocks a pragmatic implication (‘It might make you “happy”, but there’s more to life than that’). Baldwin’s use of the N-word in the Clark interview is plausibly on a par with the cited use of ‘blasphemous’, but the second two passages are less easily construed as scare-quoting. In their case, Baldwin is better understood as using the N-word (as opposed to ‘Negro’ or ‘Black’) in order to invoke a certain subset of slur-users. The point is in any case moot, since placing scare-quotes around Baldwin’s uses does nothing to undercut the challenge he presents to conjunctivism. In putting scare-quotes around a word, a speaker does not do *less* semantically than she would without them. She makes her reservations known while nonetheless putting it to its usual use. Thus, conjunctivists cannot use the fact (if it is one) that Baldwin’s use of the N-word appears in scare-quotes to hold that he, unlike the White supremacist, does not perform the derogatory acts associated with the N-word on their accounts.

To be clear, the objection here is not that conjunctivists would have Black people derogate Black people in using the N-word when they do not. The N-word is a derogatory word for Black people, and in using it, its users refer to Black people in a derogatory way. (Whether every use of the slur is objectionable or offensive is another matter, and not something on which I take a stance here. I assume both positions are reasonable.) The point is that it is one thing to say that Black users of the slur refer to Black people in a derogatory way, and another thing to e.g., accuse them of directing their audiences to take up a bigoted perspective towards Black people, in the spirit of (g) above. While the first is uncontroversial, the second is contentious, to say the least.

In sum, conjunctivists attempt to explain why slurs offend us by treating slurs as conventional vehicles for the performance of various independently intelligible derogatory acts. In doing so, they attribute a semantics to slurs that (i) fails to capture the kind of derogation associated with weaponized uses, at the same time as they (ii) paint an implausible picture of the (non-reclaimed) uses to which slurs' targets sometimes put them. If the N-word just means 'is Black and contemptible' (to take the toy view), it is difficult to see how some of its uses by Black people are reasonably regarded as inoffensive, and hard to see how we can justifiably take more offence to a White supremacist's use of the N-word than to her description of Black people as contemptible.

2. MINIMALISM

Conjunctivism stands in contrast to minimalism (Anderson and Lepore 2013a; 2013b; Bolinger 2017; Lepore and Stone 2018; Rappaport 2020). Minimalists think that uses of slurs are derogatory, and like the conjunctivist, attempt to say what this consists in. However, in contrast to conjunctivism, minimalists think it is no part of slurs' semantics to perform the derogatory acts their uses do. According to the minimalist, slurs are purely referential: they are semantically equivalent to their neutral counterparts. Utterances of slurs derogate because of extra-semantic facts that render slurs phonetically toxic. It is something about vocalizing a slur itself – i.e., a specific string of letters – that gives rise to its distinctive offense.

2.1 NUNBERG'S MINIMALISM

Unfortunately, these views are vulnerable to complaints of their own. According to one prominent brand of minimalism, slur-users offend us because of the slur-user's *pointed* choice to use a slur over a neutral alternative (Bolinger 2017; Nunberg 2018; cf. Croom 2011). Geoff Nunberg compares uses of slurs to a university dean's use of the word 'ain't' in the following utterance: 'Any junior scholar who stresses teaching at the expense of research ain't gonna get tenure'. Nunberg says that, in making the pointed choice to use the vernacular 'ain't', which is typically associated with the working-class, instead of 'is not', the dean conversationally implicates that his conclusion 'is obvious to anyone with sense' (Nunberg 2018, 265). This implicature is achieved because of commonly-known stereotypes about the word's users, despite the fact that there is no difference in meaning between 'is not' and 'ain't'. According to Nunberg, uses of slurs employ a similar mechanism. Slurs are semantically equivalent to their neutral counterparts, but making the pointed choice to use a slur conversationally implicates the speaker's self-affiliation with slur-users. Since slur-users are objectionable, affiliating with them is an offensive act.

This view is subject to complaint from a number of angles. Like the conjunctivist, Nunberg restricts his attention to the N-word's use by a certain (predominately White) section of society, so that people like Baldwin are discounted as users of it. Assuming that Baldwin is not objectionable (in the sense Nunberg intends), we cannot provide the blanket description of slur-users as objectionable. This means that if an act of self-affiliation *is* performed in using a slur, it is not clear that this amounts to an act of derogation. It may be thought that this is no serious challenge for Nunberg, who can respond by replacing his reference to slur-users with a reference to a subset thereof. The idea would then be that slur-users derogate their targets on account of conversationally implicating their self-affiliation with an objectionable subset of slur-users.

However, this move fails to take account of Baldwin's slur-use in another way, by failing to represent *his* use of the N-word. In using the N-word, Baldwin cannot plausibly be thought to perform an act of self-affiliation with an objectionable subset of slur-users. Baldwin's use of the slur may *evoke* them, but to evoke a group is not the same as self-affiliating with them.

Even if we restrict attention to slurs' weaponized uses, Nunberg's account is unsatisfactory. The features of the dean's utterance that are responsible for his implicature are noticeably absent from the kind of weaponized uses with which Nunberg wants to compare it. Specifically, it is precisely because the dean is *not* a user of the word 'ain't' that his use of the word triggers the implicature that his message is 'obvious to anyone with sense'. Had the sentence been uttered by a user of the word 'ain't' instead, the implication would not have gone through. This is what makes the dean's use of the word *pointed*, and presumably why Nunberg calls these implicatures 'ventriloquistic'. However, this feature of the case makes it a bad model for Nunberg's purposes, which is to explain the derogation that slur-users effect when they put slurs to use as weapons of verbal abuse. When a slur-user uses language that comes naturally to her, there is nothing pointed about her 'choice'.¹¹

It may be said on Nunberg's behalf that uses of slurs are *always* pointed, because of the availability of neutral counterparts. I doubt this is an effective response, but even if it is, it renders Nunberg's account reliant on what is surely a contingent feature of slurs, which is their compresence with neutral alternatives. It implies that if slurs had not been accompanied by the existence of non-pejorative counterparts, they would not have derogated. This is hard to believe.

¹¹ Perhaps a user of the word 'ain't' can generate the same implicature by uttering the sentence in a context that is sufficiently alien from the word's usual home. E.g., a user of the word 'ain't' who recognizes, and is known to recognize, that formal contexts call for 'is not' instead of 'ain't' may succeed in communicating the dean's implicature. This possibility makes no difference to the point in the text. The minimalist is trying to capture the derogatory impact of a slur's use when it is used by its users in ordinary settings. (Hess 2021) makes a similar point.

Our often-changing vocabularies are testament to the fact that it frequently seems to us that *every* word for a group of people has been invested with the derogatory attitudes of their day. Noticing a dearth of non-pejorative alternatives prompts us to introduce new words, or to repurpose old ones, in order to make neutral counterparts newly available.¹² This history relates the manifest possibility of using derogatory language in a way that cannot be pointed, because it is the only conventional means of referring to the target group that speakers have at their disposal.¹³

2.2 PROHIBITIONISM

According to a second influential species of minimalism – so-called ‘Prohibitionism’ – utterances of slurs are phonetically toxic not because they are pointed, but because slurs are *prohibited*. Utterances of them violate a social taboo and so offend us. Prohibitionism has its fair share of critics, but it does fare better than most with respect to the charges above. It does not associate slurs with descriptive contents, moral affects, perspectives, directives or implicatures (conversational or conventional), and so avoids implausible imputations Black uses of the N-word.

That said, a number of well-known complaints against the view still stand. Many people have objected to Prohibitionism on the grounds that prohibitions against pejorative language (where they are in place) are presumably instituted *because* slurs offend us, and not the other way

¹² Cf. (Hornsby 2001, 133–34; Jeshion 2013b; Camp 2013; Nunberg 2018). Some people have thought that the word ‘TERF’ represents a recent example of this phenomenon. (The term, which abbreviates ‘trans-exclusionary radical feminist’, refers to people who self-describe as feminists, but who do not consider trans women as falling within the scope of their advocacy for women’s rights.) According to them, it was necessary to introduce a new word for TERFs (sc. ‘gender critical feminist’) on account of the fact that the word ‘TERF’ had become a slur.

¹³ Proponents of these views may respond by insisting that they can accept the existence of derogatory slurs for which there are no neutral counterparts, since their view only commits them to maintaining that, in these cases, the grounds for derogation before and after the introduction of neutral counterparts are not the same. Their account (they will say) is an account of why slurs derogate *when* in possession of neutral counterparts, and other cases may call for the construction of other accounts. However, while it is plausible that the availability of a neutral counterpart affects the upshot of using a slur, it is difficult to believe that the slur does not at the same time *continue* to derogate for the reasons it did before. Minimalists can accept this, but only by conceding that their theories are woefully incomplete. See (Ashwell 2016; Falbo 2021; Hess 2021) for further criticism.

around. What is more, the Prohibitionist is poorly-placed to explain our intuitions in the following case. The White Supremacist shouts, ‘S is a N*****’; a misguided White news anchor then reports on this instance of racial abuse by saying, ‘S reported being called a N***** by the assailant’. Although the news anchor merely quotes the slur, she nonetheless produces it. Saying the sentence ‘S reported being called a N***** by the assailant’ involves vocalizing the slur no less than ‘S is a N*****’. As Hornsby observes, ‘even quotation is a *sort* of use: that it explains why even quotation of derogatory words can cause affront’ (Hornsby 2001, 130, fn. 2).¹⁴ This means that, if Prohibitionism right, we ought to find the news anchor’s utterance offensive for the same reason as the racist’s. The truth is that we do not.¹⁵

The point here is not just that the news anchor’s utterance is less offensive than the White supremacist’s, although that is true. The Prohibitionist can concede that, while putting it down to the fact we are more inclined to forgive the White news anchor for her violation of the taboo. The point is that we find the news anchor’s utterance less offensive because she *does* something less bad than the racist. If we are inclined to overlook her violation of a taboo, it is only because her use of the slur is quotational. She merely mentions the slur, instead of using it to refer to Black people. The Prohibitionist has nothing to say about why this difference should matter. As a result, she fails to capture our intuition that the White supremacist does something objectionable that the news anchor does not.¹⁶

¹⁴ Adrian Haddock has made the case for this point more generally. According to Haddock, ‘That man’s name is “Smith”’ involves the occurrence (albeit, a non-referential one) of the name ‘Smith’, no less than ‘That is Smith’. On this view, the sentence ‘That man’s name is “Smith”’ does not contain a name, distinct from ‘Smith’, that refers to it; rather, it contains the name ‘Smith’ in a non-referential, quotational use. See (Haddock 2021).

¹⁵ (Cepollaro, Sulpizio, and Bianchi 2019) cites empirical evidence in support for this claim.

¹⁶ (Lepore and Stone 2018) develop the Prohibitionist’s proposal by supplementing it with the idea that slur-words, as well as being taboo, carry non-linguistic, pejorative ‘tones’: ‘messy, heterogeneous, psychological, historical’ and socially constructed associations (ibid., 139), the specifics of which are arrived at by a method of interpretation, of the kind that metaphor and humour call for, and which targets of the slur are particularly well-placed to carry out (see (Stillman 2021) for a similar proposal). While it is undoubtedly the case that the N-word is associated with such a ‘tone’, its invocation does nothing to mark the distinction we want between use and mention. After all, words

3. AN ALTERNATIVE PROPOSAL

These objections may not be decisive; no doubt there are rejoinders available to conjunctivists and minimalists alike. However, instead of anticipating their responses, I want to articulate an alternative to the two dominant approaches that plainly avoids the charges above. We can summarize those charges by saying that no version of conjunctivism or minimalism appears able to account for the entire range of utterances involving slurs. We considered three important cases: (a) the White supremacist’s contemptuous utterance of ‘S is a N*****’; (b) Black people’s non-reclaimed uses of the N-word; and (c) the White news anchor utterance of ‘S reported being called a N***** by the assailant’. Conjunctivist views explain our feeling that (a) is more offensive than (c), but they fail to capture the full impact of (a) and paint an implausible picture of (b). Prohibitionism improves on conjunctivism (and Nunberg’s minimalism) in respect of (a) and (b), but fails to explain why (c) is invariably less offensive than (a). The view to come – I call it ‘monism’ – is constructed to capture our intuitions about the full range of uses. I articulate monism in the following subsection (§3.1), before demonstrating its immunity to the charges above (§3.2).

3.1 MONISM

Monism occupies a space between the two dominant approaches. In contrast to conjunctivism, it maintains that uses of slurs perform a *single* act as a matter of their conventional linguistic meanings. In contrast to minimalism, it holds that this act is both referential and derogatory. (To repeat, this is a claim about acts; it is not a metaphysical claim about the individuation of actions.)

presumably carry their ‘tones’ whenever, and however, they are verbalized, which is what allows the discussion of ‘tone’ in (Lepore and Stone 2018) to ‘[complement] the Prohibitionist idea of slur terms’ (ibid., 133). See (Liu 2021) for further criticism.

Let me unpack this. When I say that slurs ‘refer’ to kinds, I use the term ‘reference’ in a thin, Fregean sense, according to which every semantically significant unit refers whenever it is used non-quotationally.¹⁷ So, utterances of ‘I hate N*****s’, ‘S is a N*****’, ‘S is not a N*****’, ‘If S is a N*****, then so is T’, and so on, all count as cases of referring to Black people, as a group. Someone who says ‘S is not a N*****’, for example, refers to Black people as a group in order to say how S is not. I will also follow neo-Fregeans in thinking of reference as type-specific, so that (roughly) different species of reference correspond to different syntactic categories. Let’s call the species of reference associated with kind-terms *kind-referring*. *Kind-referring* is only performed by using a kind-term.¹⁸

The monist’s central claim is that *kind-referring* is further determinable into formally distinct derogatory and non-derogatory subspecies, the first of which is performed by uses of slurs. We can think of it like this. Slurs have two dimensions to their meanings. They refer to kinds, and they derogate them. Let’s call the acts they perform *slur-referring* and *slur-derogating*, respectively.¹⁹ The key contention of this paper is that *slur-referring* and *slur-derogating* are the

¹⁷ See (Trueman 2021) for an elaboration of this conception.

¹⁸ I agree with most conjunctivists and minimalists that slurs are co-extensive with their neutral counterparts. Although there is clearly something objectionable about an utterance of ‘All Black people are N*****’, I don’t think this is best captured by saying that the sentence is *false*. Some people have denied this; see e.g., (Ashwell 2016; Damirjian 2021; Diaz LeGaspé 2018; Foster and Ichikawa 2023; Foster Forthcoming; Hom and May 2013; Richard 2008). Most recently, Jen Foster has cited utterances like ‘It’s fine being Black but don’t be a N***** wherever you go’, and ‘There’s a difference between being a police officer and being a pig’, in support of the claim that slurs are not co-extensive with their counterparts (Foster Forthcoming). According to Foster, slurs and their neutral counterparts are each conceptually associated with distinct but overlapping sets of ‘stereotypes, beliefs and evaluative attitudes’, which respectively determine their (distinct but overlapping) extensions. I doubt that such conceptual connections exist (see below; §3.3), but there are in any case alternative explanations of the cases Foster considers (as she is aware; see §6 of her paper). Take Chris Rock’s notorious quip, ‘I love Black people but I hate N*****s’. We needn’t accept that the N-word and ‘Black’ have different extensions in order to make sense of this remark. As Nunberg notes, ‘a slur can sometimes acquire a transferred meaning in which it denotes only those members of the group who share the negative properties stereotypically assigned to the group’ (Nunberg 2018, 247, fn. 12). The kind of essentialization these uses encode is a ‘general characteristic of the extended uses of words: the pragmatic connotations attached to “tiger” as the name of a feline become part of its semantics when it is used to denote a person who is fierce and determined’ (loc. cit.). I am more inclined to describe these cases as instances of speaker-reference to a set of (non-conceptually) associated stereotypes, but Nunberg’s general point stands. See also Jeshion’s ‘G-contracting uses’ (Jeshion 2013a).

¹⁹ In a moment, I’m going to claim that *slur-referring* and *slur-derogating* are uniquely performed by uses of slurs. However, simply calling them ‘*slur-referring*’ and ‘*slur-derogating*’ begs no questions. I am picking them out as the

same act. The fact that slurs derogate kinds isn't something they do *over and above* referring to them; rather, to slur-derogate a group just is to slur-refer to them. To describe slurs as vehicles of derogation is not to assign them a semantic function additional to that of reference, but to *qualify* the sort of reference – specifically, the sort of kind-reference – that they go in for. Thus, while we can speak of *slur-referring* and *slur-derogating*, these are two different ways of talking about the same thing, each of which draws out a different aspect, or dimension, of slurs' semantics. They do not correspond to separable semantic contributions.²⁰

It follows from this identity that uses of slurs perform a referential act, *slur-referring*, that uses of their neutral counterparts do not. Utterances of words like 'Black', 'woman', 'Jew' etc. cannot slur-refer, since slur-referring is a derogatory act (it is slur-derogating), and uses of words like 'Black', 'woman', 'Jew', etc. do not perform the act of derogation that uses of slurs perform. Of course, this is consistent with there being other referential acts that are common to both slurs and their counterparts. For instance, uses of the N-word and uses of 'Black' both perform the more general acts of *kind-referring*, and *kind-referring to Black people*. The point is that there is a species of reference – specifically, a subspecies of *kind-referring* – that only slurs perform. This is a derogatory species of kind-reference. Uses of the word 'Black' perform a different, non-derogatory species of that genus.²¹

acts that slurs perform, without assuming that only they perform them. (More precisely, I am picking them out as the most specific sorts of reference and derogation that slurs perform, whatever they may be.)

²⁰ It is important to appreciate that an act can have two dimensions without resolving into two separable sub-acts. Consider the act of walking slowly. This act has two dimensions, in the sense that someone who walks slowly can be said to be both walk and to do something slowly, but there are not two distinct acts that she performs in walking slowly.

²¹ Some people may be helped by noting a comparison with a certain breed of neo-Fregeanism. According to 'Fregean Realism', recently defended in (Trueman 2021), predicating properties of objects is not something predicates do *over and above* referring to properties in the specific way associated with them – let's call it *predicate-referring*. To predicate a property of an object is *just what it is* to predicate-refer to a property. As in our case, '*x* predicates' and '*y* predicate-refers' are two superficially different ways of saying the same thing. (It will be noticed that a consequence of this view is that the word 'bravery' in 'Bravery is a virtue' does not predicate-refer.) To describe predicates as symbols of predication is not to assign them a semantic function additional to that of reference, but to qualify the sort of reference, i.e., meaning, that they go in for. The claim in the text about slurs is in many ways analogous.

An immediate upshot of this proposal is that the only way to derogate a kind in the way that slurs do is to use a slur, i.e., a derogatory kind-term. In other words, *slur-derogating* (-*referring*) is unique to slurs.²² This is because to slur-derogate *just is* to refer to a kind. Thus, the only way to derogate someone in this way is to refer to them using a derogatory kind-term (to ‘call them names’, as we sometimes put it). It follows from this that *slur-derogating* (-*referring*) cannot be cashed out in terms that are intelligible independently of knowing what a slur is. After all, if it were possible to give an informative characterization of *slur-derogating* (-*referring*), we would presumably be able to perform it without using a slur. E.g., if uses of slurs (by definition) express (the independently intelligible) attitude of contempt, there are evidently other means of doing that. Thus, in answer to the question ‘What kind of derogatory act do slurs perform?’, my answer is, ‘Well, you know what slurs are, don’t you?’. It is a form of derogation that is only appreciable to those who, in knowing what slurs are, know the contours of the space of possible speech acts that slurs perform.

In this respect, monism differs from both conjunctivism and minimalism. While their proponents are engaged in the task of *explaining* slurs’ derogation, the monist regards the futility of this endeavour to be the lesson of the charges above. As we shall see below, monism avoids these charges precisely in virtue of its deflationism. The monist’s aim is only to characterize slurs’ semantics in a way that is consistent with the full range of behaviour that they exhibit; it is not to provide an analysis of ‘slur’ that glosses its derogatory dimension in terms that are independent of, and in some sense prior to it. I make no apology for this deflationary stance. Apart from the fact that it renders monism immune to the charges above, I see little reason to think that *slur-derogating* (-*referring*) is appreciable without knowing what a slur is. I see no more reason to think that than

²² That is, one has to use a term that both refers to a kind and derogates its members in order to *slur-derogate* (-*refer*). The term can of course do other things, like e.g., conveying a conventional implicature.

to think that *naming* is explicable without using names or cognate expressions. The history of failed attempts at analysis speaks for itself.

3.2 THE WHITE SUPREMACIST, JAMES BALDWIN AND THE WHITE NEWS ANCHOR

We can sum up the monist's position as follows. There is a derogatory act that uses of slurs perform. In giving a specification of this derogatory act, the only thing we can say is that uses of slurs perform it. What is more, this act is *only* performed by uses of slurs. This is because it is a species of *kind-reference*. Because it is a species of *kind-reference*, it is only performed by kind-terms; and because it is a derogatory act, it is only performed by derogatory kind-terms. This means that the monist is not vulnerable to the charge of assimilating the White supremacist's utterance of 'S is a N*****' to something that is patently less offensive than it ('S is fucking Black', or whatever). According to the monist, the White supremacist derogates Black people in a way that is only achieved by using a derogatory kind-term, like the N-word, to refer to them. Moreover, because the monist does not associate slurs with special propositional contents, moral affects, self-affiliations or perspectives, she does not saddle slur-users with commitments that are only implausibly attributed to Black speakers. The only act Black people are saddled with is a derogatory species of reference. They refer to Black people in a derogatory way. This, presumably, is uncontentious.

It may be wondered if monism has the resources to explain why the White supremacist offends us so much more than e.g., Baldwin, who may not offend at all (cf. §1.3). If both speakers perform a derogatory act of reference, what is there to distinguish them? The answer to this is: Plenty! For starters, Baldwin is Black, his intentions are noble, and his message is not uttered contemptuously. In other words, uses of the N-word are not by default offensive or objectionable

(although they invariably refer to Black people in a derogatory way). It matters who says the word, what their intentions in using it are, how they utter the word, and so on. This is not to deny that we find the White supremacist's utterance hateful because he used the N-word. It is to suggest that her reasons for using the N-word (among other things) are what *make* her use of it objectionable.

Monism is equally well-placed to make sense of our reaction to the White news anchor's utterance. More generally, it readily accounts for what philosophers have described as slurs' striking pattern of 'projective' behaviour. Many people have noticed that when the N-word is embedded in complex constructions, its derogatory force typically 'projects out', despite the fact that such constructions normally work to distance the speaker from their embedded contents. Thus, 'A is not a N*****; he's White', and 'If the new hire is a N*****, I'm quitting', derogate Black people no less than the assertoric 'A is a N*****'. At the same time, some occurrences of the slur do appear to insulate the speaker from the same accusations of derogation. This is the case for our misguided White news anchor who mentions the N-word by quoting it, in order to report on an instance of its slurring use. The anchor offends us, but she does not derogate Black people like speakers of the preceding sentences derogate them.

Camp suggests that this distinctive pattern of projective behaviour can only be captured by an account that treats the slur's semantics as dividing into isolable meaning elements, the first of which is purely descriptive, and the second of which is derogatory.²³ This is simply not true. Monism has no trouble reflecting it. According to it, uses of the N-word perform a derogatory species of reference, *slur-referring* (-derogating). This means that the N-word derogates Black people whenever it occurs in a referential, i.e., non-quotational context. Since the sentences 'A is

²³ She writes: 'many philosophers have pointed to the fact that negative sentences like ['A is not a N*****'], in their most natural uses, deny only the predication of group membership, leaving the objectionable group-directed attitude standing, as evidence for the claim that slurs have an isolable meaning element that is purely truth-conditional' (Camp 2013, 330).

not a N*****; he's White' and 'If the new hire is a N*****, I'm quitting' are such contexts, utterances of them derogate Black people. This account also successfully predicts the fact that the White news anchor's utterance, however offensive it may be, does not derogate Black people in the way that the slur-user does. Since her utterance of the N-word is in quotation marks (that is how we would write it), she does not use it to refer to Black people, and so *a fortiori*, does not slur-refer (-derogate).

In general, any utterance of the form 'B said that A is a N*****', in which the slur is itself displayed, is effectively an instance of direct quotation. The point of such an utterance is to draw attention to the words that B actually used, and not to simply express the content she came out with. In this respect, it is different from 'Galileo said that the earth moves', the truth-value of which is unaffected by Galileo's not speaking English. When we say 'B said that A is a N*****', what we are saying is that B used the N-word.²⁴ (To be quite clear, I think that utterances of 'B said that A is a N*****', in which the slur is itself displayed, *are* offensive when uttered by some people, which is why I have refrained from displaying the slur in this paper.²⁵ The point is that they are not offensive for the same reason that B's utterance is, supposing that the report is true. B calls someone the N-word; the misguided White news anchor does not.²⁶)

3.3 ELEANOR'S NEUFELD'S 'ESSENTIALIST' THEORY OF SLURS

Let me end this section by drawing a contrast between monism and a superficially similar account.

Eleanor Neufeld's 'essentialist theory' of slurs is of interest to us because although she attributes

²⁴ I suggest we take the same line with Hom's 'NDNA' uses (Hom 2008, 429); cf. §1.3 above.

²⁵ I disagree, then, with Keith Allen's explicit judgement to the contrary (Allan 2016, 213).

²⁶ Co-opting Nunberg's account (§2) strikes me as a good way of explaining the injury that the anchor causes: after all, the decision by a White person to utter the N-word, instead of available euphemisms like 'the N-word', is rightly regarded as a pointed choice.

a derogatory dimension to slurs' semantics, she is no conjunctivist. As she says, 'I only posit one, purely predicative speech-act to explain the semantics of slurs' (Neufeld 2019, 7). In this respect, her view resembles monism. At the same time, Neufeld's view differs from monism in other crucial respects. According to Neufeld, the N-word designates a purported "blackness essence"...which is [supposed to be] causally responsible for and explains negative features stereotypically associated with being black' (ibid., 3). On this view, the N-word encodes an informationally rich sense that distinguishes its sense and reference from that of 'Black'. (Neufeld accepts that 'Black' might also designate a 'blackness essence', but insists that it is not the same one.) Indeed, because there is no such 'blackness essence' as the slur encodes, the N-word does not refer.²⁷ By contrast, monism has nothing to say about the sense of the N-word. As far as its claims go, the N-word may as well be equivalent in sense to the word 'Black'.²⁸ The difference it sees between them is not a difference in descriptive sense, but a difference in the sorts of locutionary act that their uses perform.

There are good reasons to reject Neufeld's treatment of slurs. Many people have sympathized with Camp's remark that 'the felt inadequacy of proffered paraphrases, as reflected in ellipses, hedges and other markers of approximation, naturally raise the objection why, if slurs do attribute some special [informationally rich] content, it should be so hard to make explicit' (Camp 2013, 335). In particular, it does not seem that competent slur-users need have any knowledge of the ways in which their targets are typically stereotyped.²⁹ In fact, they seem able to

²⁷ A number of theorists have argued that slurs are instances of reference failure, e.g., (Hedger 2012; Himma 2002; Hom 2008; Hom and May 2013; Richard 2008).

²⁸ Certainly, the pair do not seem to pass the test for distinctness of sense that is supplied by Gareth Evans' Intuitive Criterion of Difference, according to which 'the thought associated with one sentence S as its sense must be different from the thought associated with another sentence S' as *its* sense, if it is possible for someone to understand both sentences at a given time while coherently taking different [epistemic] attitudes towards them' (Evans 1982, 18–19).

²⁹ See e.g., (Jeshion 2013a; Camp 2013; Nunberg 2018).

deny, consistently with their use of slurs, that their targets are *F*, for any stereotype *F*.³⁰ This suggests, contra Neufeld, that ‘negative features stereotypically associated with being Black’ are no part of the N-word’s semantic content. True, many slur-users will have internalized the racist ideology that she describes. But as Hornsby notes:

we are trying to account for something readily picked up by speakers of a certain social formation; and we have to allow for the fact that racist and other derogatory words can be passed on quite easily. If speakers’ involvement with the ideology went as deep as it would need to be in order to be implicit in their very use of the words, then common understandings would be difficult to preserve. The vicious purposes of racist language would be harder to achieve than they actually are. (Hornsby 2001, 137)

It is a significant advantage of the present proposal that it is consistent with the thesis that the sense of a slur is, like that of its neural counterpart, exhausted by the fact that it stands for a particular kind (Evans 1982; McDowell 1977; 1984; 2005). It is worth pointing to a connection to minimalism here. Although minimalists are generally neutral on questions of sense, their proposal is consistent with a satisfyingly simple account of slurs semantics, according to which the sense of the N-word is, like that of ‘Black’, exhausted by the fact that it refers to Black people. On this view, there is no reason to posit a cognitively demanding descriptive sense that determines its referent by specification in order to account for the word’s derogation. While monism takes issue with the minimalist’s explanation of derogation, it does share its more attractive feature, which is its treatment of the N-word as displaying no greater semantic complexity than the word ‘Black’.

³⁰ In this sense, the N-word differs from pejorative terms like ‘Jewish American Princess’; cf. (DiFranco 2015; Jeshion 2013b).

According to monism, both the N-word and ‘Black’ refer to Black people, and that is all. The monist maintains that the N-word conventionally derogates Black people (and in holding this, she agrees with the conjunctivist), but she does not regard this as something that the slur does *over and above* referring to them. These claims are consistent with the thesis that the sense of the N-word is exhaustively given by the fact that it refers to Black people.

4. SLURS AND THE FACT/VALUE DIVIDE

According to conjunctivism, the meanings of slurs admit of a fact/value division. (Potts 2007) and (Orlando and Saab 2020) offer particularly clear statements of this assumption, with the former citing the ‘independence’ of slurs’ descriptive and expressive aspects. Camp and Jeshion are also explicit on this point. Camp writes that ‘unlike with thick terms, in the case of slurs these contributions can be cleanly distinguished, both conceptually and compositionally’ (Camp 2018, 48), with Jeshion concurring that they are ‘separable components’ of slurs’ semantics (Jeshion 2018, 81). Monism disagrees. According to it, slurs do not make a derogatory semantic contribution that is at all separable from its referential contribution. Where conjunctivists think of a slur’s derogatory dimension as an aspect that is *additional* to its referential aspect,³¹ the monist suggests that it instead be thought of as *transforming* the kind of referential act that uses of the slur perform. On this view, one cannot perform *slur-referring* without necessarily performing *slur-derogating* (and vice versa), because the acts are one and the same.

It may be wondered how this account compares slurs to so-called ‘thick’ terms, like ‘brave’ and ‘wanton’, which have also been said to resist division along fact/value lines. Let’s say that a

³¹ See (Sennet and Copp 2015, 1080) for a helpful articulation of this idea.

term is ‘thick’ if its extension cannot be appreciated without entering into an encoded evaluative perspective. It is widely held that words like ‘brave’ are thick in this sense (McDowell 1981; Williams 1985; Hornsby 2001). Although ‘brave’ has both descriptive and evaluative aspects to its meaning, it is not possible to introduce an expression that captures a putatively purely descriptive conjunct in its meaning. Although it may be possible to cobble together a purely descriptive predicate that is co-extensional with ‘brave’, we would not be able to learn how to apply it in new cases. It is only by adopting, or at least imaginatively deploying, an associated evaluative perspective that we can get its extension into view. This is what philosophers have mostly meant in saying that words like ‘brave’ resist division along fact/value lines.

The upshot of this paper for slurs is different. Monism is not the thesis that slurs are thick. Some slurs may well be thick, but being thick is not the same as having uses that slur-refer (-derogate). For instance, since the two are co-extensive, either the N-word and ‘Black’ are both thick, or neither is. By contrast, only the N-word performs the act of *slur-referring* (-derogating). More generally, the properties of being thick and slur-referring (-derogating) are independent of each other. The N-word, the C-word, ‘nag’ and ‘cur’ all slur-refer (-derogate) – they are all derogatory kind-terms – but only the first two are plausibly thick. One does not have to enter into an evaluative perspective in order to get dogs or horses into view as groups.

It is sometimes said that the N-word cannot be thick, because it is possible to give its extension in purely descriptive terms, namely by means of the word ‘Black’. This argument is too quick. It assumes that the word ‘Black’ is itself purely descriptive, which is open to doubt. Apart from the fact that words for people are likely always thick, it’s natural to think that appreciating the extension of the N-word and ‘Black’ requires entering into an evaluative perspective that is additional to the one engagement with which may be required to find the extension of ‘person’

at all intelligible. That is, determining who among us counts as Black (or White, for that matter) is naturally thought of as requiring the adoption of an evaluative outlook. After all, the application conditions for present-day uses of ‘Black’ are unclear, frequently disputed and not obviously coherent. (Consider the difficulty of following an obsessive racist’s racial classifications.) These issues are complicated,³² and I won’t try to settle them conclusively here. The important point for our purposes is that being thick is orthogonal to being a slur.

5. CONCLUDING REMARKS

According to monism, uses of slurs conventionally perform a single locutionary act of derogatory reference. Despite its departure from conjunctivism and minimalism, monism combines the most attractive features of each. It maintains with the conjunctivist that slurs differ semantically from words like ‘Black’, ‘woman’, ‘Jew’, and so on, since the latter do not slur-refer (-derogate), and *slur-referring* (-*derogating*) is no less a semantic notion than the notions of reference, predication, etc., in general. At the same time, monism upholds the minimalist’s insight that slurs refer to kinds, and that is all. They do not display a greater degree of semantic complexity than their neutral counterparts. Monism parts way with the two standard accounts by offering a non-reductive characterization of slurs’ semantics, which does not attempt to explain what their derogation more fundamentally ‘consists in’. This deflationary stance allows the view to straightforwardly

³² In particular, the idea that ‘Black’ is thick does not simply follow from the fact, overwhelmingly agreed upon, that racial groupings do not correspond to biologically real distinctions between groups of people (Appiah 1996; Fields 2012; Haslanger 2000; Hacking 2005). For instance, Barbara Fields suggests that the non-biological categories of *White* and *Black* emerged, not from a cognitive pre-disposition to regard Black people as inferior, but from a material interest in profit maximization during the slave-era production of cotton, sugar, rice and tobacco (Fields 2012, 117). Baldwin encourages a similar thought in *The Evidence of Things Not Seen*, when he says that ‘the European...became White, and the African became Black...for commercial reasons’ (Baldwin 1985, 30). Of course, the possibility must also be taken into account that ‘White’ and ‘Black’ did not mean then what they do today.

accommodate the full range of uses that slurs are put to. It treats the White supremacist as incurring a harm that only slurs incur; it refrains from implausible attributions to Black slur-users; and it captures the fact that the White supremacist does something derogatory that the news anchor does not.

If the claims of this paper are right, there are good semantic reasons for studying slurs. Many people have thought that there are good social reasons for studying them, and indeed that there are good social reasons for philosophers of language, specifically, to study them. That may well be right. However, if proponents of the two dominant approaches are right, it is less clear that there are good semantic reasons for the attention that slurs have got. After all, from their perspective, thinking about slurs does not alert us to a new semantic phenomenon that is not already well-understood. Minimalists think that slurs ‘are just plain vanilla descriptions like *cowboy* or *coathanger*’ (Nunberg 2018, 244), while conjunctivists wheel in semantic notions with which we are quite familiar: ‘complex predicate’, ‘conventional implicature’, ‘expressive act’, ‘nonrestrictive relative clause’, ‘illocutionary act’, and so on. Thus, surveying the existing literature might understandably leave one with the impression that slurs do not provide us with a rich source of philosophical insight into the nature of meaning – however important their study might be for non-semantic, social reasons.

If monism is broadly speaking right, this impression is wrong. Slurs *are* of interest on purely semantic grounds. They represent a kind of descriptive and evaluative entanglement that is interestingly different from the sort exhibited by words like ‘brave’ and ‘wanton’. They put a new semantic phenomenon on our agenda, *sc. derogatory reference*.

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