

INSULTS, SLURS, AND OTHER PEJORATIVES: A STATE OF ART

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Abstract: This paper offers an overview of the different contemporary views on the topic of pejoratives. First, I establish some broad distinctions between different types of pejoratives: insults, slurring, and swearing words. Second, I survey some of the most representative contemporary accounts for the semantic of slurs. Third, I suggest an alternative view based on a pragmatic account to slurs that focuses on the point of view the speaker accesses the world.

Keywords: Content, Linguistic Meaning, Pejoratives, Performative, Pragmatics, Semantics, Slurs, Speech Acts.

INSULTOS, INJURIAS Y OTROS PEYORATIVOS: ESTADO DE LA CUESTIÓN

Resumen: Este artículo ofrece una revisión de las diferentes posiciones contemporáneas sobre el significado de los peyorativos. Primero, establezco varias distinciones entre diferentes tipos de peyorativos: insultos, palabras para injuriar y palabras para maldecir. Segundo, analizo las posiciones más relevantes acerca de la semántica de las injurias. Tercero, sugiero una alternativa basada en una aproximación pragmática a las injurias que se centra en el punto de vista desde el cual el hablante accede al mundo.

Palabras clave: Actos de Habla, Contenido, Injurias, Peyorativos, Performativo, Pragmática, Semántica, Significado Lingüístico.

Recently, a number of philosophers of language and linguists have focused on the meaning of pejoratives. Pejoratives are the kind of word employed to disparage or abusively refer to the target, or to show some kind of contempt to individuals and groups, or to express some kind of frustration or condemnation, such as racial epithets, slurring and swearing words, and insults. This is to say, pejoratives are the kind of word used to verbally assault persons or groups of persons, even objects, because their character or physical aspects, national belonging, racial or sexual conditions, gender, social class, religious preference, or similar.

Although everyone agrees that the use of pejoratives is often offensive, there is a supposed puzzle about how the content of pejoratives can be approached. Since some occurrences are truth-conditionally analyzable, some scholars argue, pejoratives linguistically display some particularly negative, impolite, and rude content and then they should be analyzed as one of the ordinary kind terms in our repertoire that refers to things in the world and their properties. Nonetheless, they disagree on the way this content is implemented. Others advocate for a non-formal account. Since the content of sentences including pejoratives lack of truth-conditions, they say, those are neither true nor false but still represent the world in a certain way. Even others claim that it does not matter how pejoratives function or are conceived: pejoratives are prohibited words in virtue of conventions that sanction their use.

This paper focuses on the different theories that in the current literature have approached to the topic of pejoratives. First, I establish a broad distinction between different types of pejoratives: insults, slurring, and swearing words. Second, I survey some of the most representative accounts to the semantic of slurs. Since they show some kind of weakness, I will reject all of them. Third, I suggest an alternative view based on a pragmatic account to slurs that focuses on the particular point of view from which the speaker accesses the world. According to this novel view, statements including slurs are speech acts of subordination committed by the speaker in order to surrogate, demean, belittle, or diminish their targets, and this allows explaining their offensiveness from a performative perspective.

1. SOME PRELIMINARY BROAD DISTINCTIONS

In his *Logic*, Frege distinguishes between the meanings of ‘cur’ and ‘dog’ (Frege 1897). The second word is an instance of what he calls “the expression of thought” and the former is an example of the words that have little or nothing to do with that. The distinction is, of course, between those words that are relevant to truth-conditions and those that are merely expressive. In other words,

although ‘cur’ and ‘dog’ can be applied to all and the same individuals, only the first includes some negative connotation that invalidate its application in certain cases because have nothing to do with truth-conditional content but with the attitudes of the speakers.

Other examples that Frege cites are interjections such as ‘ah,’ adverbs such as ‘unfortunately,’ and cases where the tone is relevant for the meaning of the sentence. In the *Begriffsschrift*, Frege refers to the distinction between ‘and’ and ‘but’ (that I think influenced the posterior Gricean developments on implicatures) and to some cases of what he calls transformation, such as when the adjective ‘lighter’ is replaced by ‘heavier,’ changing completely the meaning of a sentence (Frege 1879). In “The Thought,” Frege also includes in the kind of expressive words interjections such as ‘alas’ and ‘thank God,’ adverbs such as ‘still’ and ‘already,’ and cases of contrast such as the subtle difference between ‘horse,’ ‘steed,’ ‘cart-horse,’ and ‘mare’ (Frege 1918).

Given the previous Fregean distinctions, it is in order to establish a first dichotomy between what we can call *non-expressive* and *expressive* content. Non-expressive content is the literal, descriptive, and cognitive linguistic content of a word, or in other words, the objective and truth-conditional content expressed by words such as ‘dog.’ The second type of content lacks truth-conditions, and it is deployed by the use of the words. This is the kind of content that is neither true nor false but still represents the world in a certain evaluative way, as when the speaker employs ‘cur’ to refer to a certain dog in a disdainful way.

From that, we can also establish a second dichotomy between *interjections* and *pejoratives*. Both can be considered as expressive words, in the sense that both kinds are employed to express attitudes more than to describe facts. To illustrate this distinction, think about the following phrases:

- (1) They have hired *that bastard* Joe.
- (2) *Oops!* I have spilled the coffee on my blouse.

Both sentences include expressive words, but their role on meaning is different. In (1), the presence of ‘that bastard’ modifies the meaning of the sentence in a particular way: it shows some kind of contempt against Joe from part of the speaker.¹ And this is proven by the fact that the speaker could express the same exact truth-conditional content without employing the pejorative. If the speaker

1 Here I am employing the word ‘bastard’ in its figurative and offensive sense. Of course, ‘bastard’ also has a literal, old-fashion descriptive content that refers to a “person born of unmarried parents; an illegitimate baby, child, or adult.” This is the supposed neutral-counter part of the negative use of ‘bastard,’ a dichotomy that I will introduce below.

is trying to describe facts, why does she use the pejorative then? In (2), instead of demeaning the target, the speaker is expressing her surprise, frustration, or whatever other mood belongs to her in that particular occasion. And something similar can be said of other occurrences of interjections such as the previously mentioned ‘ah’ and ‘alas,’ and ‘ouch’ (Kaplan 2004). This is to say, there are words that should be considered pure-expressive terms because they are employed to deploy and express the different moods and attitudes of the speakers, from joy to frustration, but not necessarily neither any negative attitude to the target nor to refer negatively to an individual or group.²

We can also establish a third distinction between *insults*, *swearing* and *slurring* words. Slurring words are the kind of word employed by speakers to directly disparage or subordinate not only the target, but also all individuals and groups that the word can be applied to because they possess a certain condition, belong to a certain group or social class, have a certain nationality, their sexual orientation or gender, and so on. Insults instead express certain contempt towards a single individual that is the target of the sentence. Swearing words express some kind of condemnation or frustration by the speaker, and they differ from interjections in the sense that the attitude expressed is always negative. Suppose the following sentences:

- (3) Shut up, *dumbass!*
- (4) I spilled the *damn* coffee on my shirt!
- (5) This building is full of *spics*.

We can find an example of insults in (3). By this sentence, the speaker directly refers in a disparaging way to her interlocutor with the intention to offend by giving him a name with highly negative connotations. (4) includes a swearing word. Here ‘damn’ is neither used in its literal meaning of ‘eternal condemnation’ nor with the negative intention of offending the target. Instead it is employed to express the frustration of the speaker when spilling the coffee on her shirt. In (5), however, we find an instance of a slurring word. By uttering this sentence, the speaker is showing not only contempt toward the target, additionally it is also demeaning all the individuals that belong to the group tagged under ‘spics,’ independently of the speaker intention of doing so or not. Since the last of the pejorative kinds is the more problematic, in the following section I will survey some of the most representative contemporary approaches to slurs.

2 The previous distinction is, of course, incomplete. There are other kinds of words that belong to the category defined as non-purely expressive words. Think, for instance, of the linguistic function of honorifics and nicknames, or the role in meaning of linguistic phenomena such as register, coarseness, and the so-called Child Direct Speech. For an introductory approach to these and other words based on a theory of bias, see Predelli 2013.

2. CONTEMPORARY APPROACHES TO SLURS

In the current literature on the meaning of slurs we can find two main positions. First, there are those that follow a semantic strategy. According to this strategy, the derogatory and negative content of slurs is part of the literal, descriptive, cognitive, and truth-conditional linguistic content of the words. Second, there are other scholars that follow a pragmatic strategy. This strategy claims that slurs display contempt by the particular way that slurs are employed, which results from characteristics of the context of their utterance. In the following two subsections, I will survey the most representative positions within both strategies to highlight some of the difficulties and issues that all of them have when explaining the meaning of these words.

2.1 SEMANTIC INTERPRETATIONS OF SLURS

Semantic interpretations of slurs claim the thesis of compositionality. According to them, the meaning of a sentence depends on the truth-conditions inherited because of its components. In other words, the meaning of a sentence basically depends on the way the world might be for that sentence to be true. And the truth-conditions of a sentence (its meaning) depend on the meaning of all its elements, that is, of the words that compound the sentence. Since the meaning of a word depends on the individuals that belong to the category referred by the word (literally, its extension), given that slurs are always semantically empty (because, these theories say, there is no individual that we can attribute the negative characteristics highlighted by the word), then every sentence in which a slur appear will lack of truth-value. Even though all semantic positions agree on this basic conclusion, nonetheless they disagree on the way the truth-conditional content is implemented. The main issue with these theories is that, even though we can claim that every occurrence of a slur makes truth-valueless the sentence that contains it, slurs are still meaningful and their utterance cause social harm.

2.1.1. *Inferentialism*

Inferentialist accounts on meaning, in contrast to the referentialist approaches explained below, give center stage to the inference rules for the language to explain the referential role of words. Since Inferentialism only appeals to inferential intralinguistic rules, it cannot explain what words really refer to extralinguistic objects or how language can be employed to interact with the extralinguistic environment. So, in addition to use inferential rules such as the introduction and

elimination rules for the logical constants in a Gentzen-style system of natural deduction, Inferentialism also generalizes conceptual roles in language to connect perceptual states and nonlinguistic actions to explain certain social behaviors. Consequently, because the rules that sanction the use of language have priority over other aspects, Inferentialism claims that practice is prior to theory. This is to say, one understands the meaning of words in a sentence if and only if one knows how to successfully apply the inferential rules for the introduction and elimination of the word in question.

This thesis sounds very conservative. If we claim that the rules of the language spoken by the community will determine the semantics on which those rules are valid, then the community could never be criticized for employing invalid rules because the rules can only be evaluated from the inside, in clear contrast with referentialist theories. Nonetheless, this quietist thesis has been questioned. Prior (1960) argues that not all inferential rules are self-validating. He introduces a hypothetical new binary sentence connective ('tonk'):

<p style="text-align: center;">Inference rule-Introduction (for 'tonk')</p> $\frac{A}{A \text{ tonk } B}$	<p style="text-align: center;">Inference rule-Elimination (for 'tonk')</p> $\frac{A \text{ tonk } B}{B}$
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If the inferential rules for 'tonk' are only one half of the standard for the introduction of the disjunction and the elimination of the conjunction respectively, then taken together they allow inferring whatever conclusion one wants from whatever premise one employs because "no assignment of meaning to 'tonk' makes both Tonk-Introduction and Tonk-Elimination truth-preserving" (Williamson 2009:138).

Belnap (1962) points out that fault can derive from inferential rules without necessity to accept a conservative extension of the original system. Since restriction of the extended consequence relation only occurs in the original language, new rules do not interfere with inferential relations between old sentences. Then, according to Belnap, if defined properly, we can introduce a further constraint on the rules with which to introduce an expression in order to avoid either failure because its weakness or quietism because it is too strong. (Of course, not all inferentialists accept this constraint. For instance, Brandom (1994:127-130; 2000:71-72) negates Belnap's liberalist thesis because new inferences can be useful for old sentences too).

However, 'tonk' is not a satisfactory example because it is artificial and it is not a clear example of a concept at all. Then, the question now is to figure out whether there is any example of a defective inferential practice within natural language. Dummett (1973) suggests that pejoratives seem to exhibit the kind of non-conservativeness pointed out before. For Dummett, the classical example of pejoratives are terms of ethnic abuse such as 'boche': "the condition for applying

the term ['boche'] to someone is that he is of German nationality; the consequences of its applications are that he is barbarous and more prone to cruelty than other Europeans. We should envisage the connections in both directions as sufficiently tight as to be involved in the very meaning of the word: neither could be severed without altering its meaning" (1973:456). This passage describes the inferential rules of introduction and elimination for 'boche':

Inferential rule-Introduction (for 'boche')	Inferential rule-Elimination (for 'boche')
<u>Hans is German</u>	<u>Hans is a boche</u>
Hans is a boche	Hans is cruel and barbarous

According to Dummett, the inferential rules induce a non-conservative extension of the language without pejoratives because they allow the inference from 'Hans is German' to 'Hans is cruel and barbarous,' which presumably could not be made without them. But this is highly problematic. If we think about the neutral counterpart of 'boche' according to the same inferential terms, we should admit that the meaning of 'German' also responds to the same inferential rules and could be predicated of this as synonymous of "barbarous and more prone to cruelty than other Europeans," which is implausible. Then, pejoratives usage seems to rest on inadequate proof-theory, according to Dummett's inferential rules (see also Brandom 1994:126, 2000:69-70; and Boghossian 2003:241-242).

Although pejoratives do not seem to follow the logic of inferentialist rules, they are clearly occurring and meaningful words of our ordinary language. Thus, it is counter-intuitive that words such as 'boche' express concepts that allow using sentences were they occur to express thoughts, however bad they are. Or, as Boghossian says, "plausibly, a thinker possesses the concept 'boche' just in case he is willing to infer according to its inferential rules" (2003:242). Thus, one can fully understand the word ('boche' in this case) only if understands sentences that bigots utter in which that word occurs. So, if one finds racist, abusive, and offensive the pejoratives of our language, it is because we know what they mean and we can understand them, and not because we fail to do so. Since the comprehension of a word such as 'boche' supposes necessarily having the concept that the word expresses, it follows that to know the conditions of inference is neither a sufficient nor a necessary condition to understand pejoratives or to possess the required concept. It is not sufficient because pejoratives "identify targets *via* concepts with contents distinct from those expressed by their neutral counterparts" (Anderson & Lepore 2013a:27). And it is not necessary because, as Williamson says, "it is possible to understand 'boche' without understanding 'German'" (2009:143).³

3 For an alternative inferentialist theory, see Whiting 2007, 2008, and 2013. See also Tirrell 1999.

2.1.2. *Conventional Implicaturism*

Unlike Inferentialism, which claims that the rules for an expression determine whatever is determined about its reference, Conventional Implicaturism (CI) claims a referentialist thesis. The difference between referential expressions such as ‘boche’ and ‘German,’ according to CI, is based not on the inferential rules for their applications but on the attitudes of contempt that the former word conveys and that are absent when the second word occurs. In other words, since the knowledge of application of words is not important for determining the meaning of a sentence, the intention to offend is not sufficient for derogatory purposes.

According to CI, some words conventionally implicate negative, belittling content. Thus, the offender not only needs to know the rules of use of a word for accomplish her purpose. In addition, she should also employ the adequate words to accomplish the offense. In other words, since the derogatory and offensive content of pejoratives, the occurrence of a pejorative always is “the speech act of conventionally implicating the [demeaning] content” (Hom 2008:424), but not the subjective, occasional intention to surrogate the target in a particular moment (what Grice calls conversational implicature). CI, then, follows a Gricean mechanism. In the same way that sentences like

(6) John is British *but* brave

(7) John is British *and* brave

are semantically equivalent but differ in meaning because (6) conventionally implicates a contrast between British and brave that is absent in (7), someone using a pejorative conventionally implicates a demeaning, offensive content without impact in the truth-value of the sentence (Potts 2005, 2007; Williamson 2009, 2010). According to CI then, sentences including pejoratives accomplish the same characteristics that Grice described of conventional implicatures. That is, they are detachable and non-cancellable (Grice 1961, 1967).

In contrast with conversational implicatures, which implicitly say what cannot be said otherwise, conventional implicatures implicitly convey something that can be said explicitly by employing a more direct phrase. In the previous example, (6) conventionally implicates the same content that is explicitly said in (7) by saying something else. In other words, conventional implicatures are a way of implicitly conveying a content that goes beyond the truth-conditional content of the sentence. They are conventional in as much as they are triggered by the linguistic meaning of a word in the sentence. However, the truth-conditions of both sentences remain the same even though the derogatory content is merely implicated and not semantically expressed. The problem with this explanation, nonetheless, is that in the case of pejoratives the detachability criterion does not

seem to be always available. We cannot block the offensive content of a pejorative by merely employing its supposed neutral counterpart without changing the truth-conditions of what we said because, as the conventional implicaturist defends, the offensive content is part of the meaning of pejoratives (Hom 2008:423-4, 2010:177-8, 2012:391; Anderson & Lepore 2013a:34). Given the negative content of slurs cannot be retracted or denied, CI also assumes that slurs are non-cancellable. In contrast with conversational implicatures, which can explicitly deny the intention supposedly implicitly convey, it is not possible for a conventional implicature denying what is implicated by saying what is said. Thus, in the case of pejoratives, we cannot just block the offensive content conventionally implicated because “someone who says ‘Lessing was boche, although I do not mean to imply that Germans are cruel’ merely adds hypocrisy to xenophobia” (Williamson 2009:150). However, the thing is that some occurrences of pejoratives seem to be cancellable (Hom 2010:178, 2012:390), for instance when one employs a pejorative for pedagogical purposes, invalidating again the CI theses.⁴

2.1.3. *Presuppositional approaches*

Linguistic presupposition allows speakers and audience to mutually assume propositions in the common context of a conversation for communicative purposes (Stalnaker 1974). Under this view, slurs are the kind of words that presuppose negative content of their target. In other words, “expressives are lexical items that carry a presupposition of a particular sort, namely one which is indexical (it is evaluated with respect to a context), attitudinal (it predicates something of the mental state of the agent of that context), and something shiftable (the context of evaluation need not be the context of the actual utterance)” (Schlenker 2007:237. See also Macià 2002). To reiterate, presuppositionalist approaches seem to say that bigot speakers employing slurs are trying to get us involved and agree with their bigot views on the target. Otherwise, Presuppositionalism is problematic.

First, presuppositional content seem to be cancellable by conditionalization; slurs, contrarily, are not. For instance, Potts (2007:170) shows the difference between presuppositions and expressive words (such as pejoratives) with regard to their interaction with ‘plugs’ (operators that invalidate the compositional

4 Other important criticism against CI is whether conventional implicatures really exist or they are a myth (see Bach 1999). If Bach is right, the negative content of slurs cannot be conveyed by Gricean mechanisms. Also, it is important to remember that Grice distinction has profusely been criticized and it is normally not accepted by pragmatic approaches. Even Grice himself doubted about the validity of his provisional dichotomy (Cf. Grice 1967:43).

contribution of the embedded clause to the presuppositional content of the sentence). In a sentence like

- (8) John believes that he is the present king of France (even though there is none),

Potts says, there is no necessity that John presupposes another sentence such as, say, ‘There is a unique king of France.’ Unlike the previous example, Potts argues, the content of sentences including slurs is non-displaceable. Even though the sentence

- (9) Sue believes that that bastard Kresge should be fired (#I think he’s a good guy).

includes the plug ‘believes,’ the sentence fails to prevent the presuppositional negative content embedded flourishing and contributes to the presuppositional content of the sentence as a whole. Or in other words, given the wide scope of sentences including slurs, expressive content cannot be identified with presuppositional content.⁵

Second, presuppositions simply are not the right kind of mechanism to accurately explain uses of pejoratives. As Richard (2008:20) argues, “slurs introduce negative presuppositions about their target into the conversational record when no one dissents.” The thing is, he points out, to think about pejoratives in this way supposes to misdescribe the way speakers interact because rather than trying to introduce something into the conversation, “someone who is using these words is insulting and being hostile to their target” (Richard 2008:21), and this is precisely what the non-bigot hearer and the target would never accept. In other words, to think of slurs as carrying presuppositional negative content (or as trying to introduce negative information into the conversational background) supposes to miss that slurs are typically employed to verbally insult and assault their targets, independently of whether the negative content conveyed belongs to a linguistic organized practice or not.

2.1.4. *Stereotyped Contextualism*

Following the theory of stereotypes (see Putnam 1975), stereotyped theories of slurs semantically encode stereotypes of the group targeted as reference of the

⁵ For similar criticism, see also Kaplan 1999, 2004; Kripke 2009, 2011:351-372; and Hom 2010:176.

slurring words employed. This is to say, in the same way that the occurrence in a sentence of a token of a natural kind term such as ‘gold’ semantically encodes the essential characteristics that describe the type ‘gold,’ the occurrence of a slur ‘S’ semantically encodes and expresses the properties that describe the type-group ‘S.’ Thus, the stereotyped theory explains pejoratives’ offensiveness in terms of the offensiveness of the highlighted features included in the stereotype for such pejoratives. Even though, as Jeshion (2013) says, every semantic approach to pejoratives could follow under this category, because the diversity and complexity of the way that the different semantic theories account for the way the content of pejoratives is implemented, in this paper I have introduced a different division.

However, there is a theory that explicitly embraces stereotyped semantics: the Kaplanesque-like Theory of Bias (Predelli 2013). According to Predelli’s theory for non-truth-conditionality, slurs and their assumed neutral-counterpart are character-indistinguishable but only the first items in each pair are biased (that is, includes some kind of prejudice). In other words, based on the classical distinction introduced by Kaplan (1989) between content and character, two sentences including a slur and its neutral-counterpart respectively refer to exactly the same individuals (they have the same extension) because they refer to a certain characteristic that all individuals under the words’ scope share (say, nationality, race, sexual condition, and so on), but only the second biased-word (the pejorative) expresses a negative connotation precisely in virtue of that enlightened property. As Predelli says, “the generic attitude at issue in a bias such as [x] may naturally be explicable by appealing to a particular stereotype, conventionally linked with the term in question, and at least in part associated with negative connotations” (2013:98).

2.1.5. *Semantic Perspectivism*

According to Semantic Perspectivism, pejoratives are the kind of word that implement contents from a certain perspective, which includes some non-displaceable negative connotation that non-bigoted audiences will resist. This position is semantic because treats perspectives As part of pejoratives’ meaning in virtue of some characteristics they possess.

Because perspectives offer a way to explain content truth-conditionally, they are representational but not necessarily committed to any particular content. As part of its conventional function, a perspective motivates certain feelings usually associated to its semantic value, normally highlighting some emotional, psychological, or social relation between speakers and their contents. Perspectives are dispositions that allow different structures of thought, and involve some

kind of hierarchy within its components. Also, since perspectives are aspects of cognition, they generate cognitive structures and play crucial roles in motivating behavioral explanations. To reiterate, “perspectives are modes of interpretation: open-ended ways to thinking, feeling, and more generally engaging with the world and certain parts thereof” (Camp 2013:335-336). Therefore, Camp says,

by employing a slur a speaker signals a commitment to an overarching perspective on the targeted group as a whole... [T]he speaker signals a commitment to taking the property *g* that determines the slur’s extension to be a highly *central* feature in thinking about *G*s. The speaker thinks it is relevant to draw attention to *g* because he takes *g* to be highly diagnostic, or classificatory useful. And typically, he thinks this because he takes being *g* to explain a range of further properties, which are themselves prominent in his thinking and which he takes to warrant certain affective and evaluative responses. [...] In this sense, the perspective treats each individual member of *G* as primarily, and in some sense *only*, a *G*: for the bigot, being *g* determines who these people are. (2013:337)

Nonetheless, it is necessary to highlight that, according to Camp, slurs are not offensive *per se*. Slurs are offensive because non-bigot hearers, those that disagree with *g* being an appropriate way to refer and substantively characterize the target, do accept neither the affects nor the attitudes usually associated to the target by the bigot’s perspective (negative by definition). But, since different uses of the same slur associate different feelings, perspectives do not conventionally express contempt. Unfortunately, since the difficulty to explain slurs’ extended uses and slurs’ derogatory variation from perspectivist semantics for slurs, I think that Semantic Perspectivism is not a satisfactory solution, and should be taken aside. My solution, however, will defend a pragmatic perspectivism.

2.1.6. *Combinatorial Externalism*

Given the failure of the different attempts of explaining pejoratives, Hom presents an alternative: the Combinatorial Externalism (CE) (Hom 2008), also known as the Thick Semantic Externalism (Hom 2010). As the theory of “thick” concepts (defined by Williams 1985 for explaining ethical words), CE suggests that some expressions are both normative and descriptive. Because the semantic content of a pejorative is the cause of its social use, “to predicate a slur of someone is to say that they ought to be treated in *such-and-such* a way for having *such-and-such* properties” (Hom 2012:394), being the “social institution of racism” which seconds their derogatory, offensive content who determines the “thickness” of the normativity of pejoratives.

CE resembles to new Expressivism (below) in analyzing pejoratives as “thick” concepts, but they differ in a key element. Because the expressivist conceives pejoratives as lacking of truth-value, they are misrepresentations of their target. Differently, CE considers pejoratives as truth-evaluable terms that “have empty extensions” because “no one deserves to be treated negatively for having stereotypical properties because of their race, gender, sexual orientation, and so on, and hence atomic predications of slurs are always false” (Hom 2012:394).

According to my point of view, CE has a problem similar to the problem that Hom identified for Expressivism. If, according to Expressivism, pejoratives always express some negative attitude towards, or misrepresent some property of, their target then the expressivist account of pejoratives cannot explain occurrences of positive expressions (such as “princess,” “madam,” and “angel”) because these do neither express negative attitudes towards, nor misrepresent the properties of, their target. In the same way, if we insist, as CE does, in considering false every occurrence of a pejorative because there is no one to whom its content can be applied, then we should also say that every occurrence of a positive expression is also false because they have empty extension too, since nobody has the properties predicated by the positive word.

CE could try to resist this criticism by saying that positive expressions always carry positive, true content. Nonetheless, the counter-argument does not follow because then CE can only explain pejorative uses of positive terms as positively employed, such as the expression “princess” said to a boy by a bigoted coach, very different that positively said by me to my daughter (even though one could insist that every occurrence of “princess” is derogatory). The problem, to summarize, is that CE cannot offer a satisfactory explanation of the application and meaning of positive words, and a successful theory of pejoratives should include also such an explanation.

2.1.7. *Conversational Implicature Strategy*

To solve the previous problem, Hom (2012) presents an alternative view about pejoratives: the Conversational Implicature Strategy (CIS). CIS argues that the previous criticism includes non-orthodox occurrences of pejoratives: “the literal content of the pejorative serves to generate the derived content of metaphors and similes,” where the pejorative “creates a metaphor for damaging, devaluating, or making something worse” (Hom 2012:398). Differently, orthodox occurrences are non-truth-conditional, non-displaceable, and cancellable. Because orthodox uses of pejoratives avoid the scope of truth-functional and intensional operators and the audience realizes that what is said is not what the speaker

means, their contents are non-literal. Therefore, orthodox occurrences of pejoratives should be analyzed according to Gricean conversational maxims, becoming thus inference patterns of subordination because what the speaker intends to communicate is something different that the literal content without appealing to conventional mechanisms.

According to my view, CIS is still problematic. It cannot carry out the expressive requirement of negative attitudes assumed by pejoratives. If we consider statements including pejoratives as speech acts of subordination committed by the speaker in order to surrogate, demean, belittle, or diminish their targets, then what matters is not the inferential pattern which can display this negative content, but the particular bigoted, diminishing view from the speaker accesses the world, and this is something that cannot be reduce to semantics. To explain the demeaning content of a pejorative requires then to explain the way that the speaker expresses derogatory attitudes to the target through some particular property of the world enlighten as negative, and this is something that belongs to the shared bigoted-worldview of offenders.

A weaker criticism could also be that, according to Gricean interpretations, conversational implicatures become conventional implicatures when evolved, and then the truth-conditions will appear again. In other words, sentences including pejoratives will become truth-conditional with the time. The thing is that Hom explicitly considers, following Bach, that conventional implicatures are a myth. Additionally, Hom also rejected Gricean mechanisms as explanatory of the meaning of pejoratives. Why to defend now conversational implicatures as satisfactory explanations of pejorative occurrences?⁶

2.2. PRAGMATIC INTERPRETATIONS OF SLURS

Theories that follow the pragmatic strategy argue that pejoratives either lack of content, or this is not reducible to semantic content. Hom (2010:170) refers to them as nominalist theories. Their main thesis is that, if pejoratives make a contribution to the content of the sentence, this is displayed by the use of the word in an utterance, and only there can be analyzed.

⁶ An accurate summary of characteristics, positions, and problems related to pejorative usage can be found in Hom & May 2013.

2.2.1. *Expressivism and Neo-Expressivism*

Expressivism is a meta-ethics theory that states that, because the function of moral language is non-descriptive, moral sentences do not have truth conditions but express an evaluative attitude toward an object. Classical expressivist theories include the Emotivism defended by Ayer 1936, Stevenson 1944, and Hare 1963, among others.

Given an alleged problem with attitude attribution in certain negative and conditional contexts (the so-called Frege-Geach problem) that shows some inflexibility of expressive words such as pejoratives when the speaker does not express the usual attitude that should accompany the word, Richard (2008) argues for a renewed version of Expressivism. This “gappy nominalism” (Hom 2010:171) or “new expressivism” (Miscevic 2011:159) argues that “while giving truth conditions and assigning truth bearers to sentences and mental states plays a role in an account of meaning, important aspects of meaning are not explained in such terms” (Richard 2011:141). In the case of pejoratives, the expressivist argues that it is mistaken to say that this kind of word says something that is true or false *simpliciter* of its target (in direct discourses), or we do not want to say that what was said of something is true or false (in indirect discourses) because “if I think what the bigot said is true, I think that a slur lives in the building” (Richard 2011:141).

Given that truth is the wrong dimension to evaluate this kind of expression, Neo-Expressivism states, “the meaning of a slur depends on how it is used” (Richard 2008:15) because pejoratives are “thick terms” (in the sense of Williams 1985 introduced above): the kind of concepts that mix categorization and attitude or, in other words, descriptions and evaluations. Thus, pejoratives express some derogatory, denigrating, or debasing attitude in virtue of certain illocutionary potential carried by the expression that is neither true nor false, but still represents the world in a certain way.⁷ In other words, because slurs misrepresent their targets, they lack of truth-value and cannot be approached from a purely semantic view.

7 It is usually assumed (for some authors like Richard, for instance) that Hornsby defends another version of the new Expressivism: the negative, offensive character of pejoratives is explained by some kind of gestural component (gesturalism). In her words, “it is as if someone who used, say, the word ‘nigger’ had made a particular gesture while uttering the word’s neutral counterpart. An aspect of the word’s meaning is to be thought of as if it were communicated by means of this (posited) gesture” (Hornsby 2001:140). Because, as Hom (2010:171) says, Hornsby offers little explanation about what she means by “gestural aspect” and how this content can be determined, I prefer to consider her approach as a semantic version of Prohibitionism, given that she suggests pejoratives as “useless” words. Hom’s denomination ‘silencism’ seems also to express this thought (Hom 2008:417).

The main difference between the old and the new Expressivism is the characterization of the so-called neutral counterparts of pejoratives. It is usually assumed the existence of a counterpart for every pejorative that does not carry the offensive, derogatory content that the pejorative possesses. Unlike expressivists, Neo-Expressivism does not think that pejoratives and their neutral counterpart are synonymous. Slurs express some negative attitude to its target that is not carried by the neutral counterpart. Therefore, Neo-Expressivism seems to distinguish between pejorative expressions and pejorative uses of expressions. Because the use of some words displays negative attitudes towards their targets, some uses of supposed neutral words can also be employed to denigrate their targets; although the status of a pejorative is assumed as different because “a word is a slur when it is a conventional means to express strong negative attitudes towards members of a group” (Richard 2008:12).

However, Richard fails to specify, first, why pejorative uses of an expression lack of truth-conditions and, second, why non-negative uses of pejoratives have truth-conditional content. An additional problem for Expressivism, as Hom (2010:172) points out, is that the same conditions that work for pejoratives should also work for positive words. If we think, as the expressivist does, that these words always express some kind of negative attitude, or misrepresentation about the target, then positive words cannot be approach because they do not carry negative content at all. As before, a complete theory of pejoratives should explain also positive words, and neither Expressivism nor Neo-Expressivism account for them in a suitable way.

2.2.2. *Prohibitionism*

Prohibitionism approaches for slurs based on a double aim. On the one hand, prohibitionist deflates all content-based account of slurs. As Anderson & Lepore state, “each, no matter how it is conceived, we will argue, is irrelevant to an understanding of how slurs function and why they offend” (2013a:26). On the other hand, “slurs are prohibited words not on account of any content they get across, but rather because of relevant edicts surrounding their prohibition” (Ibid.). Briefly, Prohibitionism claims that no matter how slurs function, or are conceived, they are prohibited words in virtue of conventions that sanction their use (see also Anderson & Lepore 2013b).

Prohibitionism does not accept, as it is usually assumed, the existence of a counterpart for every slur that does not carry the offensive, derogatory content that supposedly the slur possesses. Because “slurs identify targets via concepts with contents distinct from those expressed by their neutral counter-parts”

(Anderson & Lepore 2013a: 17) and “slurs, as a matter of convention, carry negative attitudes towards targeted groups” (Anderson & Lepore 2013a: 26), Prohibitionism claims that, even if we agree that a slur and its assumed neutral counter-part are co-extensive, both terms differ in meaning.

As the standpoint argues, the prohibition is based on embedded occurrences of the word that risk offending those who respect the prohibition, not on the slur’s content: “embedding, we know, sometimes renders semantic properties of an expression inert, but it cannot nullify its occurrence and the prohibition is against that” (Anderson & Lepore 2013a: 38). *A priori* this assumption seems right. Although there are some scenarios where it is assumed that the use of slurs is legitimate. How can be this possible if a slur is the type of word that always derogates and offends?

On the one hand, “there are legitimate cases of reclamation where targeted members consciously employ a slur on each other, often in a positive and defiant way” (Anderson & Lepore 2013a:41). These are cases of appropriation. In these cases, a member of the targeted group can decide to use the pejorative applied without displaying contempt because his belonging to the group legitimates him to use it; usually to express his membership, his sympathies for the other members of the group, his camaraderie, or even in an attempt to change the conventional negative meaning associate to the pejorative. In other words, appropriation of a pejorative alters its meaning for use within the group. On the other hand, we have cases of non-appropriation. These are alleged pedagogical cases where the use of pejoratives is supposedly employed without denigration because of the use of the indirect discourse or quotation, because “quotation has some sealing off effect” (Hornsby 2001:130) or “mere quotation marks isolate us from derogatory implications” (Williamson 2009:139).

Nonetheless, because uses in indirect discourse are often offensive and because the content of some words is so offensive and derogatory, Prohibitionism discourages the use of pejoratives. In other words, because the demeaning, offensive content of (any use of) pejoratives, we should adopt a silencing strategy over them. Even if we accept pejoratives as “absolutely useless” because of their derogatory content (Hornsby 2001:130), since they lack of truth-conditions, every time that someone uses a pejorative she performs a speech act of subordination towards its target. This fact should discourage any use of pejoratives, even those supposedly legitimated by means of pedagogical or appropriation reasons.

Because the pedagogical and appropriation uses still exist, one problem for prohibitionists is to identify the mechanism that distinguish those expressions that should be excluded of our ordinary discourse and those that are allowed. Maybe the alternative is to construct a new prohibitionist account according to which what is prohibited are not words, but certain uses of words. Nonetheless, it still

remains the problem to identify the mechanism that distinguishes between pejorative uses of certain words and their non-offensive uses (Maitra 2013).

The main problem with Prohibitionism is that if we assert that slurs perform acts of subordination at the target, by claiming prohibition as an answer we commit an act of double subordination (Colomina 2014). In other words, in addition to the original subordination via the slur, we eliminate the possibility of appropriation. If we claim silence as an answer for slurs, the capacity to perform another kind of speech act with the same slur word that that employed by the offender is not available anymore, condemning the target to be under subordination for both the demeaning offense expressed by the bigoted speaker and the impossibility to use the slur differently to diminish its contemptuousness. So, Prohibitionism must be abandoned and a better alternative view is required to explain the behaviour of slurs and other pejoratives.

3. AN ALTERNATIVE VIEW ON SLURS: PERLOCUTIONARISM

According to my view, a non-semantic approach of slurs, one that excludes truth-conditions as a way to evaluate them, should neither deny that they express negative attitudes nor prohibit their use. Call this novel view Perlocutionarism because it thinks of sentences including slurs and other pejoratives as performatives. In other words, this view considers uses of slurs as illocutionary acts of subordination committed by the speaker in order to surrogate, demean, belittle, or diminish their targets. As other perlocutionary acts, the derogatory act of slurs is made by means of an illocutionary act, an act that depends entirely on the audience's reaction. Consequently, in the same way that by means of acquiring a compromise the speaker promises to the hearer or by means of apologizing the speaker asks excuses to the addressee, by means of slurring the speaker derogates the target. And, in the same way that other illocutionary acts, slurring does not depend on the audience's reaction to what has been said, but it does depend on the audience's capacity to recognize the utterance in a certain way, as an act of derogation in this case.

To understand how Perlocutionarism explain the offensiveness of slurs, suppose the following scenario

[S]omeone drives by a group standing on a corner and yells out:

(3) You niggers and spics don't belong here!

Imagine that everyone in this group is African-American, and that one of them attempts to clear up the confusion with (4),

(4) I think you three must be the niggers, and the rest of us are the spics.

(borrowed from Anderson & Lepore 2013b:353)

Since the speaker may have no intention to derogate, one is tempted to say that the speaker is not trying to perform anything in using those words. Nonetheless, it is a common confusion to think that performatives only depend on the speaker intention. Additionally, the fact that the speaker has no intention to offend does not mean that the speaker did not derogate at all.

First of all, and this demonstrates why the explanation of pejoratives offensiveness requires a sociolinguistic perspective, there is some inaccuracy in the previous analogy between 'nigger' and 'spic.' We have to remember that historically 'nigger' is a derogatory word that has its origin in chattel slavery referring to African Americans whereas 'spic' is a word which originated on the northeast coast of the US in the early twentieth century, and mainly employed inside the Army, to refer to Puerto Ricans independently of whether they were black or not, specifically after the 1917 passing of Jones Act to grant US citizenship to Puerto Ricans to allow them to enroll as soldiers to participate in the WWI. We cannot simply say that both terms are equally derogatory and offensive. For sure, the former is more derogatory and offensive than the latter. And, for sure, they are not synonymous and cannot be applied to the same individuals, at least on questions of race.

Second, performatives mainly depend on the complete situation and context of speech, the convention if you prefer to say. (Remember Austin's famous example of the drunken person trying to baptize a boat). In our previous case, we could say that the speaker had no intention of derogating the target (perhaps because she was placed in a scenario where she was using appropriated words), but this fact does not mean that the slurs (both 'nigger' and 'spic') have not the illocutionary potential to perform the derogation, even within the same ethnic group.

Additionally, we should not forget that slurs are multidimensional, and can be used in a number of different ways. For instance, some persons could have been felt derogated when they heard the utterance "I think you three must be the niggers, and the rest of us are the spics," or (some members of) the audience could be offended because the (use of the) slurs, independently of whether there is intention of derogating or not. I am sure that many African Americans were offended when Chris Rock (an African American comedian appropriating the word 'nigger') stated in his show: "I love blacks, but I hate niggers." Because, and this proves my point about multidimensionality, Rock's phrase is not offensive because of a question of race but because a question of class. In other words, not all cases of appropriation are positive. Some can be perfectly negative, as it was Rock's intention when changing the target of the slur to refer not to all African Americans but to class subordinate individuals of African American descent.

Therefore, what really matters to accomplish these speech acts of subordination, it is not the inferential and/or semantic pattern which can display this

negative attitude, but the particular bigoted, diminishing view by which the speaker accesses the world, and this is something that cannot be reduce to semantics. But if we would like to reserve the possibility that the speech act committed by the use of a slur fails because the audience does not recognize its illocutionary force, then we should explain no the way that words fail to express or convey their content but the way that linguistic patterns are normatively sanctioned by certain societal practices and taboos. To explain the derogation embedded to a slur then, requires accounting for the way that the speaker expresses negative, demeaning attitudes to the target through some particular way to accessing and categorizing the world. And this is something embedded in the shared bigoted worldview of offenders, and not only in their words.

4. CONCLUSION

In this paper, I have presented an overview of the most representative contemporary views on pejoratives.

In the first section, I have established some distinctions. I distinguished between what I have called expressive and non-expressive contents, between purely expressive words (such as interjections) and non-purely expressive words (such as pejoratives), and between insults, swearing, and slurring words. In the second section, I have surveyed seven semantic interpretations of slurs and pejoratives (Inferentialism, Presuppositionalism, Conventional Implicaturism, Stereotyped Contextualism, Semantic Perspectivism, Combinatorial Externalism, and the Conversational Implicature Strategy) and two pragmatic approaches (Emotivism/Expressivism and Prohibitionism). I have devoted the third section to introduce an alternative view on slurs and other pejoratives, what I call Perlocutionarism, which considers sentences including slurs as performative acts of derogation.⁸

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